36th Anniversary Issue

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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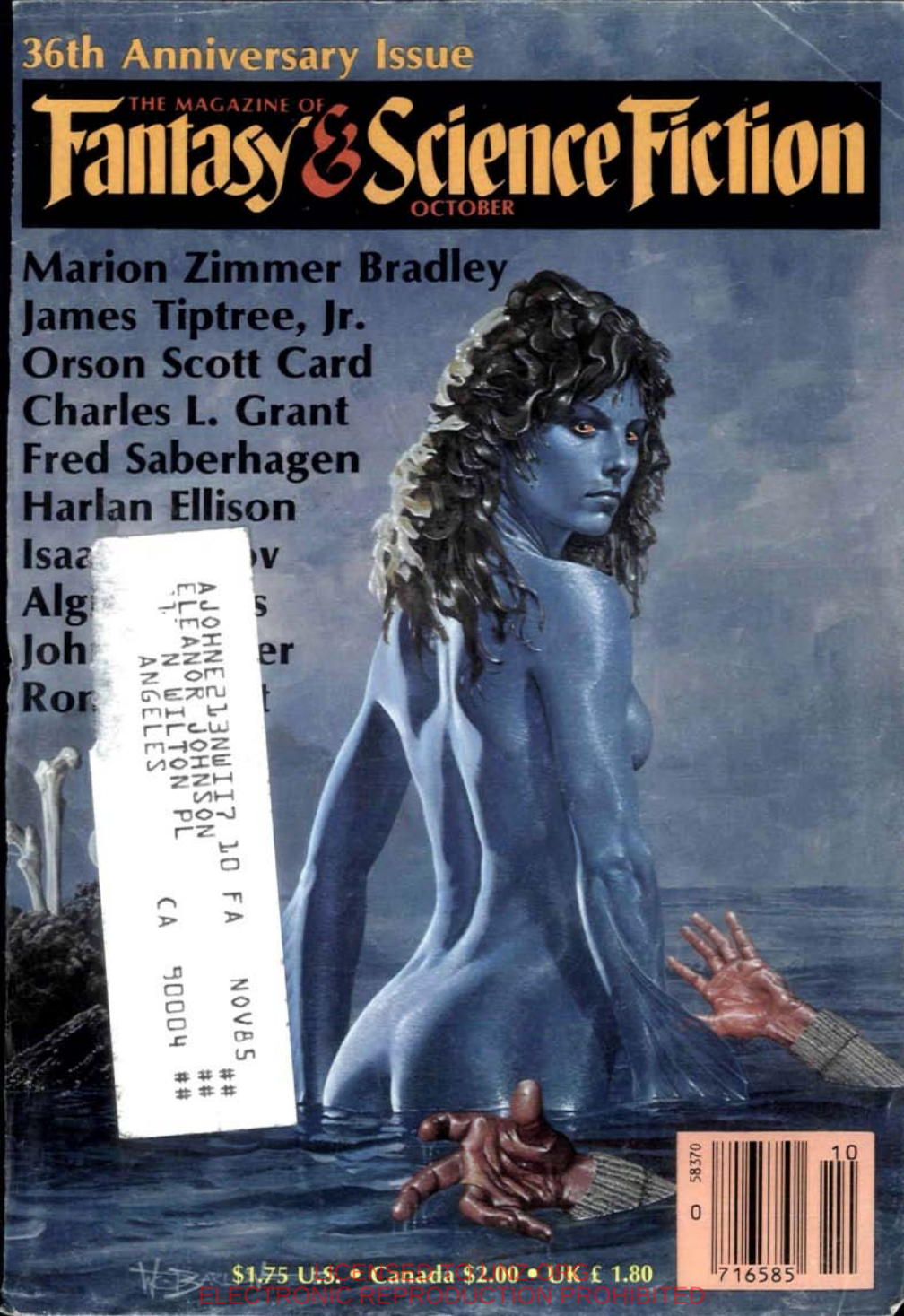

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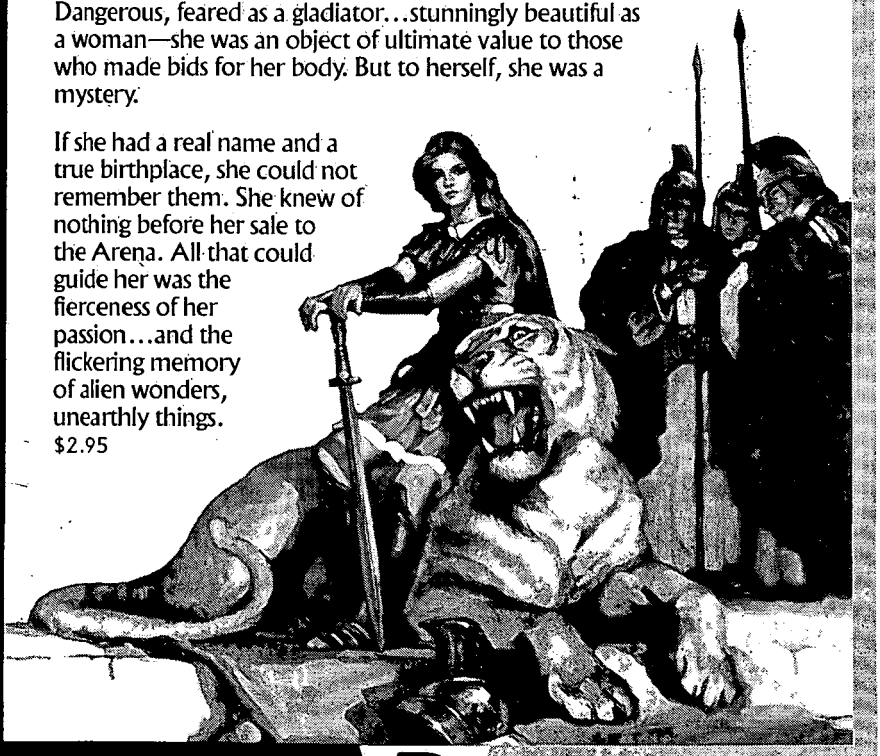

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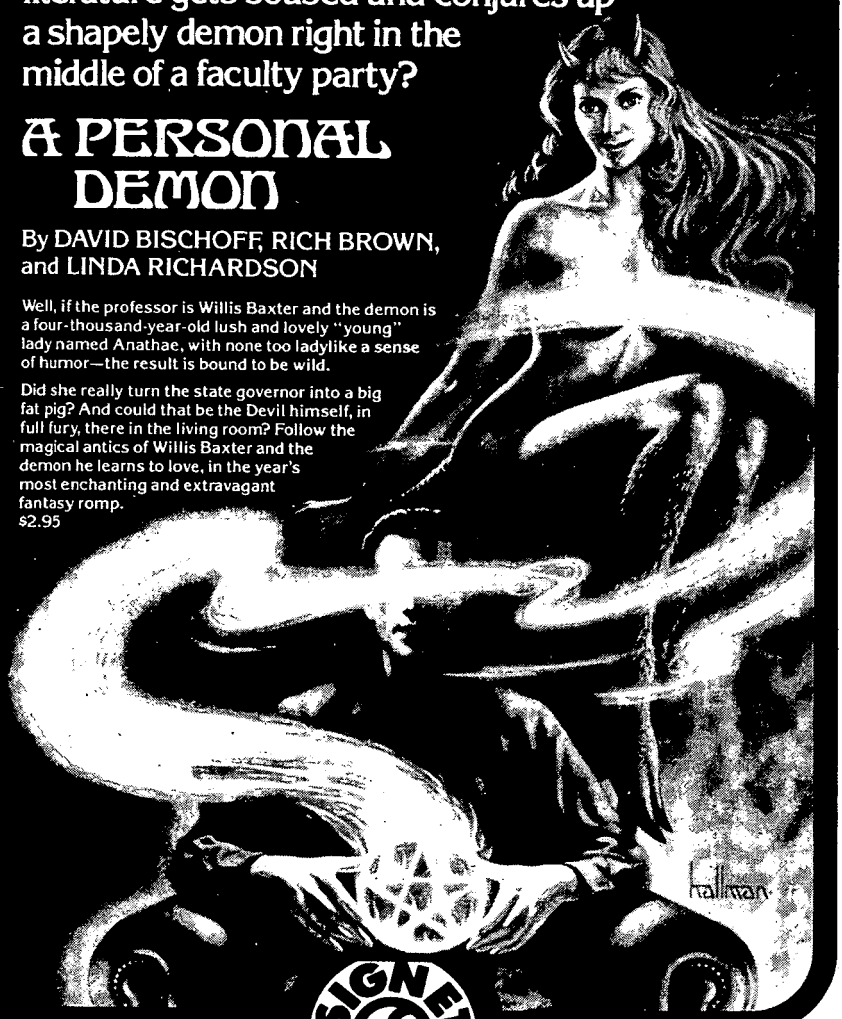

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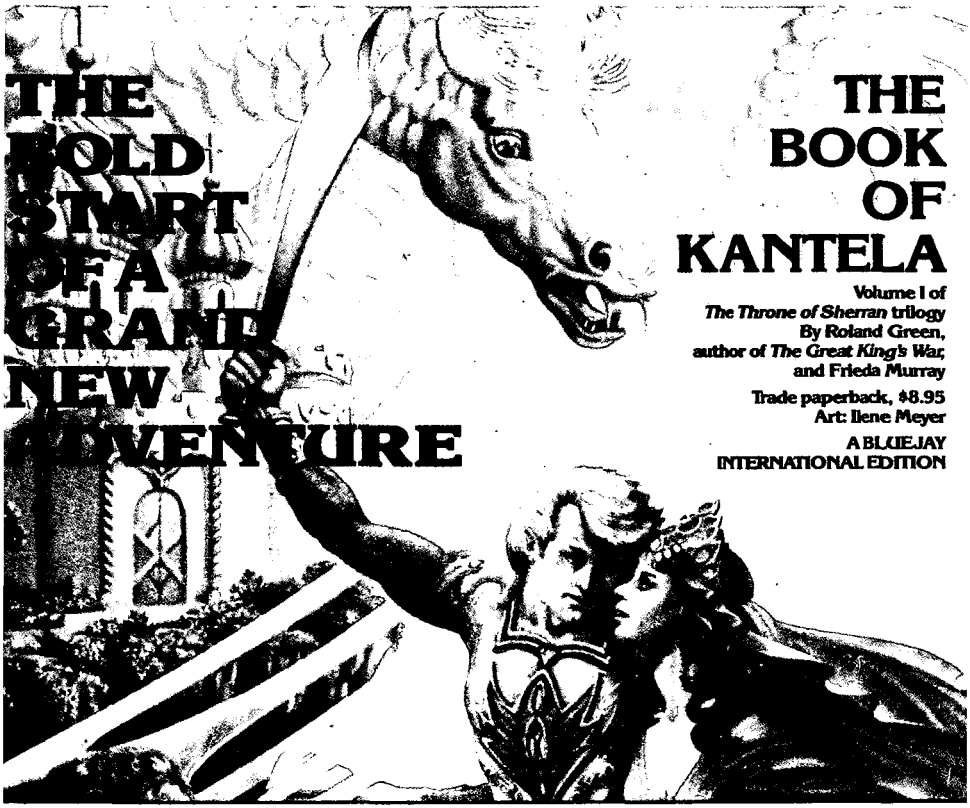

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James Tiptree's new story takes place out at the Great North Rift, which happens to be the frontier of known space, and it moves there in a ship piloted by a green-eyed young woman who happens to be one of the most appealing characters you are likely to encounter in these or any other pages. The author's latest novel is BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR (Tor).

The Only Neat Thing To Do

BY
JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

Heroes of space! Explorers of the starfields!

Reader, here is your problem:

Given one kid, yellow-head, snub-nose-freckles, green-eyes-that-stare-at-you-level, rich-brat, girl-type, fifteen-year-old. And all she's dreamed of, since she was old enough to push a hologram button, are heroes of the First Contacts, explorers of far stars, the great names of Humanity's budding Star Age. She can name you the crew of every Discovery Mission; she can sketch you a pretty accurate map of Federation Space and number the Frontier Bases; she can tell you who first contacted every one of the fifty-odd races known; and she knows by heart the last words of Han Lu Han when, himself no more than sixteen, he ran through alien flame-weapons to drag his captain and pilot to safety on Lyrae 91-Beta. She does a little math, too; it's easy for her. And she haunts the spaceport and makes friends with everybody who'll talk to her, and begs rides, and knows the controls of fourteen models of craft. She's a late bloomer, which means the nubbins on her little chest could almost pass for a boy's; and love, great Love, to her is just something pointless that adults do, despite her physical instruction. But she can get into her junior space suit in seventy seconds flat, including safety hooks.

So you take this girl, this Coati Cass — her full name is Coatillia Canada Cass, but everyone calls her Coati—

And you give her a sturdy little space-coupe for her sixteenth birthday.

Now, here is your problem:

Does she use it to jaunt around the star-crowded home sector, visit-

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ing her classmates and her family's friends, as her mother expects, and sometimes showing off by running a vortex beacon or two, as her father fears?

Does she? Really?

Or — does she head straight for the nearest ship-fitters and blow most of her credit balance loading extra fuel tanks and long-range sensors onto the coupe, fuel it to the nozzles, and then — before the family's accountant can raise questions — high-tail for the nearest Federation frontier, which is the Great North Rift beyond FedBase 900, where you can look right out at unknown space and stars?

That wasn't much of a problem, was it?

The exec of FedBase 900 watches the yellow head bobbing down his main view corridor.

"We ought to signal her folks c-skip collect," he mutters. "I gather they're rich enough to stand it."

"On what basis?" his deputy inquires.

They both watch the little straight-backed figure marching away. A tall patrol captain passes in the throng; they see the girl spin to stare at him, not with womanly appreciation but with the open-eyed unselfconscious adoration of a kid. Then she turns back to the dazzling splendor of the view beyond the port. The end of the Rift is just visible from this side of the asteroid Base 900 is dug into.

"On the basis that I have a hunch that that infant is trouble looking for a place to happen," Exec says mournfully. "On the basis that I don't believe her story, I guess. Oh, her ident's all in order — I've no doubt she owns that ship and knows how to run it, and knows the regs; and it's her right to get cleared for where she wants to go — by a couple of days. But I cannot believe her parents consented to her tooting out here just to take a look at unknown stars. ... On the basis that if they did, they're certifiable imbeciles. If she were my daughter—"

His voice trails off. He knows he's overreacting emotionally; he has no adequate excuse for signaling her folks.

"They must have agreed," his deputy says soothingly. "Look at those extra fuel tanks and long-range mechs they gave her."

(Coati hadn't actually lied. She'd told him that her parents raised no objection to her coming out here — true, since they'd never dreamed of it — and added artlessly, "See the extra fuel tanks they put on my ship so I'll be sure to get home from long trips? Oh, sir, I'm calling her the *CC-One*; will that sound too much like something official?")

Exec closes the subject with a pessimistic grunt, and they turn back into his office, where the patrol captain is waiting. FedBase 900's best depot supply team is long overdue, and it is time to declare them official-

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ly missing, and initiate and organize a search.

Coati Cass continues on through the surface sections of the base to the fueling port. She had to stop here to get clearance and the holocharts of the frontier area, and she can top off her tanks. If it weren't for those charts, she might have risked going straight on out, for fear they'd stop her. But now that she's cleared, she's enjoying her first glimpse of a glamorous Far FedBase — so long as it doesn't delay her start for her goal, her true goal, so long dreamed of: free, unexplored space and unknown, unnamed stars.

Far Bases *are* glamorous; The Federation had learned the hard way that they must be pleasant, sanity-promoting duty. So, the farther out a base is, and the longer the tours, the more lavishly it is set up and maintained. Base 900 is built mostly inside a big, long-orbit, airless rock, yet it has gardens and pools that would be the envy of a world's richest citizen. Coati sees displays for the tiny theater advertising first-run shows and music, all free to station personnel; and she passes half a dozen different exotic little places to eat. Inside the rock the maps show sports and dance shells, spacious private quarters, and winding corridors, all nicely planted and decorated, because it has been found that stress is greatly reduced if there are plenty of alternate, private routes for people to travel to their daily duties.

Building a Far Base is a full-scale Federation job. But it conserves the Federation's one irreplaceable resource — her people. Here at FedBase 900 the people are largely Human, since the other four spacefaring races are concentrated to the Federation's south and east. This far north, Coati has glimpsed only one alien couple, both Swain; their greenish armor is familiar to her from the spaceport back home. She won't find really exotic aliens here.

But what, and who, lives out there on the fringes of the Rift? — not to speak of its unknown farther shores? Coati pauses to take a last look before she turns in to Fuels and Supply. From this port she can really see the Rift, like a strange irregular black cloud lying along the northern zenith.

The Rift isn't completely lightless, of course. It is merely an area that holds comparatively few stars. The scientists regard it as no great mystery; a standing wave or turbulence in the density-texture, a stray chunk of the same gradients that create the galactic arms with their intervening gaps. Many other such rifts are seen in uninhabited reaches of the starfield. This one just happens to form a useful northern border for the irregular globe of Federation Space.

Explorers have penetrated it here and there, enough to know that the usual distribution of star systems appears to begin again on the farther side. A few probable planetary sys-

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tems have been spotted out there; and once or twice what might be alien transmissions have been picked up at extreme range. But nothing and no one has come at them from the far side, and meanwhile the Federation of Fifty Races, expanding slowly to the south and east, has enough on its platter without hunting out new contacts. Thus, the Rift has been left almost undisturbed. It is the near presence of the Rift that made it possible for Coati to get to a real frontier so fast, from her centrally located home star and her planet of Cayman's Port.

Coati gives it all one last ardent look, and ducks into the suiting-up corridor, where her small suit hangs among the real spacers'. From here she issues onto a deck over the asteroid surface, and finds *CC-One* dwarfed by a new neighbor; a big Patrol cruiser has come in. She makes her routine shell inspection with disciplined care despite her excitement, and presently signals for the tug to slide her over to the fueling stations. Here she will also get oxy, water, and food — standard rations only. She's saved enough credit for a good supply if she avoids all luxuries.

At Fuels she's outside again, personally checking every tank. The Fuels chief, a big rosy woman whose high color glows through her faceplate, grins at the kid's eagerness. A junior fuelsman is doing the actual work, kidding Coati about her array of spares.

"You going to cross the Rift?"

"Maybe next trip. ... Someday for sure," she grins back.

A news announcement breaks in. It's a pleasant voice telling them that DRS Number 914 B-K is officially declared missing, and a Phase One search will start. All space personnel are to keep watch for a standard supply tug, easily identifiable by its train of tanks, last seen in the vicinity of Ace's Landing.

"No, correction, negative on Ace's Landing. Last depot established was on a planet at seventeen-fifty north, fifteen-thirty west, RD Eighteen." The voice repeats. "That's far out in Quadrant Nine B-Z, out of commo range. They were proceeding to a new system at thirty-twenty north, forty-two-twenty-eight west, RD Thirty.

"All ships within possible range of this course will maintain a listening watch for one minim on the hour. Anything heard warrants return to Base range. Meanwhile a recon ship will be dispatched to follow their route from Ace's Landing."

The announcer repeats all coordinates; Coati, finding no tablet handy, inscribes the system they're headed to on the inside of her bare arm with her stylus.

"If they were beyond commo range, how did they report?" she asks the Fuels chief.

"By message pipe. Like a teeny-weeny spaceship. They can make up to three *c*-skip jumps. When you work

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beyond range, you send back a pipe after every stop. There'll soon be a commo relay set up for that quadrant, is my guess."

"Depot Resupply 914 B-K," says the fuelsman. "That's Boney and Ko. The two boys who — who're — who aren't — I mean, they don't have all their rivets, right?"

"There's nothing wrong with Boney and Ko!" The Fuels chief's flush heightens. "They may not have the smarts of some people, but the things they do, they do 100 percent perfect. And one of them — or both, maybe — has uncanny ability with holocharting. If you go through the charts of quadrants they've worked, you'll see how many B-K corrections there are. That work will save lives! And they haven't a gram of meanness or pride between them; they do it all on supply pay, for loyalty to the Fed." She's running down, glancing at Coati to see if her message carried. "That's why Exec took them off the purely routine runs and let them go set up new depots up north. ... The Rand twins have the nearby refill runs now; they can take the boredom because of their music."

"Sorry," the fuelsman says. "I didn't know. They never say a word."

"Yeah, they don't talk," the chief grins. "There, kid, I guess you're about topped up, unless you want to carry some in your ditty bag. Now, how about the food?"

When Coati gets back inside Base and goes to Charts for her final briefing, she sees what the Fuels chief meant. On all the holocharts that cover the fringes of 900's sector, feature after feature shows corrections marked with a tiny glowing "B-K." She can almost follow the long, looping journeys of that pair — what was it? Boney and Ko — by the areas of richer detail in the charts. Dust clouds, g-anomalies, asteroid swarms, extra primaries in multiple systems — all modestly B-K's. The basic charts are composites of the work of early explorers — somebody called Ponz has scrawled in twenty or thirty star systems with his big signature (B-K have corrected six of them), and there's an "L," and a lot of "YBCs," and more that Coati can't decipher. She'd love to know their names and adventures.

"Who's 'SS'?" she asks Charts.

"Oh, he was a rich old boy, a Last War vet, who tried to take a shortcut he remembered and jumped himself out of fuel way out there. He was stuck about forty-five standard days before anybody could get to him, and after he calmed down, he and his pals kept themselves busy with a little charting. Not bad, too, for a static VP. See how the SS's all center around this point? That's where he sat. If you go near there, remember the error is probably on the radius. But you aren't thinking of heading out *that* far, are you, kid?"

"Oh, well," Coati temporizes. She's wondering if Charts would report

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her to Exec. "Someday, maybe. I just like to have the charts to, you know, dream over."

Charts chuckles sympathetically, and starts adding up her charges. "Lots of daydreaming you got here, girl."

"Yeah." To distract him she asks, "Who's 'Ponz'?"

"Before my time. He disappeared somewhere after messaging that he'd found a real terraform planet way out that way." Charts points to the northwest edge, where there's a string of GO-type stars. "Could be a number of good planets there. The farthest one out is where the Lost Colony was. And that you stay strictly away from, by the way, if you ever get that far. Thirty-five-twelve N — that's thirty-five minutes twelve seconds north — thirty-forty west, radial distance — we omit the degrees; out here they're constants — eighty-nine degrees north by seventy west — that's from Base 900, they all are — thirty-two Bkm. Some sort of contagion wiped them out just after I came. We've posted warning satellites. ... All right, now you have to declare your destination. You're entitled to free charts there; the rest you pay for."

"Where do you recommend? For my first trip?"

"For your first trip ... I recommend you take the one beacon route we have, up to Ace's Landing. That's two beacons, three jumps. It's a neat place: hut, freshwater lake, the works. Nobody lives there, but we have a rock hound who takes all his long leaves there, with a couple of pals. You can take out your scopes and have a spree; everything you're looking at is unexplored. And it's just about in commo range if you hit it lucky."

"How can places be out of commo range? I keep hearing that."

"It's the Rift. Relativistic effects out here where the density changes. Oh, you can pick up the frequency, but the noise, the garble factor is hopeless. Some people claim even electronic gear acts up as you really get into the Rift itself."

"How much do they charge to stay at the hut?"

"Nothing, if you bring your own chow and bag. Air and water're perfect."

"I might want to make an excursion farther on to look at something I've spotted in the scope."

"Green. We'll adjust the chart fee when you get back. But if you run around, watch out for this vortex situation here." Charts pokes his stylus into the holo, north of Ace's Landing. "Nobody's sure yet whether it's a bunch of little ones or a great big whopper of a g-pit. And remember, the holos don't fit together too well—" He edges a second chart into the first display; several stars are badly doubled.

"Right. And I'll keep my eyes open and run a listening watch for that lost ship, B-K's."

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"You do that...." He tallies up an amount that has her credit balance scraping bottom. "I sure hope they turn up soon. It's not like them to go jazzing off somewhere. ... Green, here you are."

She tenders her voucher-chip. "It's go," she grins. "Barely."

Still suited, lugging her pouch of chart cassettes, Coati takes a last look through the great view-wall of the main corridor. She has a decision to make. Two decisions, really, but this one isn't fun — she has to do something about her parents, and without giving herself away to anybody who checks commo. Her parents must be signaling all over home sector by now. She winces mentally, then has an idea: Her sister on a planet near Cayman's has married enough credits to accept any number of collect 'skips, and it would be logical— Yes.

Commo is two doors down.

"You don't need to worry," she tells a lady named Paula. "My brother-in-law is the planet banker. You can check him in that great big ephemeris there. Javelo, Hunter Javelo."

Cautiously, Paula does so. What she finds on Port-of-Princes reassures her enough to accept this odd girl's message. Intermittently sucking her stylus, Coati writes:

"Dearest Sis, Surprise! I'm out at FedBase 900. It's wonderful. Will look around a bit and head home stopping by you. Tell folks all O.K., ship goes like dream and million thanks. Love, Coati."

There! That ought to do it without alerting anybody. By the time her father messages FedBase 900, if he does, she'll be long gone.

And now, she tells herself, heading out to the port, now for the big one. Where exactly should she go?

Well, she can always take Charts' advice and have a good time on Ace's Landing, scanning the skies and planning her next trip. She's become just a little impressed by the hugeness of space and the chill of the unknown. Suppose she gets caught in an uncharted gravity vortex? She's been in only one, and it was small, and a good pilot was flying. (That was one of the flights she didn't tell her folks about.) And there's always next time.

On the other hand, she's *here* now, and all set. And her folks could raise trouble next time she sets out. Isn't it better to do all she can while she can do it?

Well, like what, for instance?

Her ears had pricked up at Charts' remark about those GO-type suns. And one of them was where the poor lost team was headed for; she has the coordinates on her wrist. What if she found them! Or — what if she found a fine terraform planet, and got to name it?

The balance of decision, which had never really leveled, tilts decisively toward a vision of yellow suns — as Coati all but runs into the ramp edge leading out.

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A last flicker of caution reminds her that, whatever her goal, her first outward leg must be the beacon route to Ace's. At the first beacon turn, she'll have time to think it over and really make up her mind.

She finds that *CC-One* has been skidded out of Fuels and onto the edge of the standard-thrust takeoff area. She hikes out and climbs in, unaware that she's broadcasting a happy hum. This is IT! She's really, really, at last, on her way!

Strapping in, preparing to lift, she takes out a ration snack and bites it open. She was too broke to eat at Base. Setting course and getting into drive will give her time to digest it; she has a superstitious dislike of going into cold-sleep with a full tummy. Absolutely nothing is supposed to go on during cold-sleep, and she's been used to it since she was a baby, but the thought of that foreign lump of food in there always bothers her. What puts it in stasis before it's part of her? What if it decided to throw itself up?

So she munches as she sets the holochart data in her computer, leaving FedBase 900 far below. She's delightedly aware that the most real part of her life is about to begin. Amid the radiance of unfamiliar stars, the dark Rift in her front view-ports, she completes the course to Beacon 900-One AL, and listens to the big *c*-skip converters, the heart of her ship, start the cooling-down process. The *c*-skip drive unit must be supercooled to near absolute zero to work the half-understood miracle by which reciprocal gravity fields will be perturbed, and *CC-One* and herself translated to the target at relativistic speed.

As the first clicks and clanks of cooling resound through the shell, she hangs up her suit, opens her small-size sleep chest, gets in, and injects herself. Her feelings as she pulls the lid down are those of a child of antique Earth as it falls asleep to awake on Christmas morning. Thank the All for cold-sleep, she thinks drowsily. It gave us the stars. Imagine those first brave explorers who had to live and age, to stay awake through all the days, the months, the years....

She wakens in what at first glance appears to be about the same starfield, but when she's closed the chest, rubbing her behind where the anti-sleep injections hit she sees that the Rift looks different.

It's larger, and — why, it's all around the ship! Tendrils of dark almost close behind her. She's in one of the fringy star-clumps that stick out into the Rift. And the starfield looks dull, apart from a few blazing suns — of course, there aren't any nearby stars! Or rather, there are a few very near, and then an emptiness where all the middle-distance suns should be. Only the far, faint star-tapestry lies beyond.

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The ship is full of noise; as she comes fully awake she understands that the beacon signal and her mass-proximity indicator are both tweeting and blasting away. She tunes them down, locates the beacon, and puts the ship into a slow orbit around it. This beacon, like FedBase, is set on a big asteroid that gives her just enough g's to stabilize.

Very well. If she's going to Ace's Landing, she'll just set in the coordinates for Beacon 900-Two AL, and go back to sleep. But if she's going to look at those yellow suns, she must get out her charts and work up a safe two- or three-leg course to one of them.

She can't simply set in their coordinates and fly straight there, even if there were no bodies actually in the way, because the 'skip drive is built to turn off and wake her up if she threatens to get too deep in a strong gravity field, or encounters an asteroid swarm or some other space hazard. So she has to work out corridors that pass really far away from any strong bodies or known problems.

Decide. ... But, face it, hasn't she already decided, when she stabilized here? She doesn't need that much time to punch in Beacon Two!. ... Yes. She *has* to go somewhere really wild. A hut on Ace's Landing is just not what she came out here for. Those unknown yellow suns *are*. ... and maybe she could do something useful, like finding the missing men; there's an off chance. The neat thing to do might be to go by small steps, Ace's Landing first — but the *really* neat course is to take advantage of all she's learned and not to risk being forbidden to come back. Green, go!

She's been busy all this while, threading cassettes and getting them lined up for those GO suns. As Charts had warned her, edges don't fit well. She's working at forcing two holos into a cheap frame made for one, when her mass-proximity tweeter goes off.

She glances up, ready to duck or deflect a sky-rock. Amazed, she sees something unmistakably artificial ahead. A ship? It grows larger — but not large enough, not at the rate it's coming. It'll pass her clean. Whatever can it be? Visions of the mythical tiny ship full of tiny aliens jump to her mind.

It's so small — why, she could pick it up! Without really thinking, she spins *CC-One's* attitude and comes parallel, alongside the object. She's good at tricky little accelerations. The thing seems to put on speed as she idles up. Touched by chase fever, she mutters, "Oh, no, you don't!" and extrudes the rather inadequate manipulator arm.

As she does so, she realizes what it is. But she's too excited to think, she plucks it neatly out of space, and after a bit of trying, twists it into her cargo lock, shuts the port behind it, and refills with air.

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She's caught herself a message pipe! Bound from the gods know where to FedBase. It was changing course at Beacon One, like herself, hence moving slowly. Has she committed an official wrong? Is there some penalty for interfering with official commo?

Well, she's put her spoon in the soup, she might as well drink it. It'll take awhile for the pipe to warm to touchability. So she goes on working her charts, intending merely to take a peek at the message and then send the little thing on its way. Surely such a small pause won't harm anything — pipes are used because the sender's out of range, not because they're fast.

She hasn't a doubt she can start it going, again. She's seen that it's covered with instructions. Like all Federation space gear, it's fixed to be usable by amateurs in an emergency.

Impatiently she completes a chart and goes to fish the thing out of the port while it's still so cold she has to put on gloves. When she undogs its little hatch, a cloud of golden motes drifts out, distracting her so that she brushes her bare wrist against the metal when she reaches for the cassette inside. Ouch!

She glances at her arm, hoping she hasn't given herself a nasty cold-burn. Nothing to be seen but an odd dusty scratch. No redness. But she can feel the nerve twitch deep in her forearm. Funny! She brushes at it, and takes out the cassette with more care. It's standard record; she soon has it threaded in her voder.

The voice that speaks is so thick and blurry that she backs up and restarts, to hear better.

"Supply and Recon Team Number 914 B-K reporting," she makes out. Excitedly she recognizes the designation. why, that's the missing ship! This *is* important. She should relay it to Base at once. But surely it won't hurt to listen to the rest?

The voice is saying that a new depot has been established at thirty-twenty north, forty-two-twenty-eight west, RD Thirty. That's one of the yellow suns' planets, and the coordinates Coati has on her wrist. "Ninety-five percent terraform." The voice has cleared a little.

It goes on to say that they will work back to FedBase, stopping to check a highly terraform planet they've spotted at eighteen-ten north, twenty-eight-thirty west, RD Thirty, in the same group of suns. "But— uh—" The voice stops, then resumes.

"Some things happened at thirty-twenty. There're people there. I guess we have to report a, uh, First Contact. They—"

A second voice interrupts abruptly.

"We did just like the manual! The manual for First Contacts."

"Yeah," resumes the first voice. "It worked fine. They were really friendly. They even had a few words from Galactic, and the signals. But they—"

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"The wreck. The wreck! Tell them," says the other voice.

"Oh. Well, yeah. There's a wreck there, an old RB. Real old. You can't see the rescue flag; it has big stuff growing on it. We think it's Ponz. So maybe it's his First Contact." The voice sounds unmistakably downcast. "Boss can decide. . . . Anyway, they have some kind of treatment they give you, like a pill to make you smart. It takes two days; you sleep a lot. Then they let you out and you can understand everything. I mean — everything! It was — we never had anything like that before. Everybody talking and understanding everybody! See how we can talk now? But it's funny.... Anyway, they helped us find a place with a level site, and we fixed up a fuel dump really nice. We—"

"What they looked like!" the other voice butts in. "Never mind us. Tell about them, what they looked like and how they did."

"Oh, sure. Well. Big white bodies with fur all over. And six legs — they mostly walk on the back four; the top two are like arms. They have like long bodies, long white cats, big; when they rear up to look, they're over our heads. And they have. ..." Here the voice stammers, as if finding it hard to speak. "They have like two, uh, private parts. Two sets, I mean. Some of them. And their faces" — the voice runs on, relieved — "their faces are *fierce*. Some teeth! When they came and looked in first, we were pretty nervous. And big eyes, sort of like mixed-up people and animals. Cats. But they acted friendly, they gave back the signals, so we came out. That was when they grabbed us and pushed their heads onto ours. Then they let us go, and acted like something was wrong. I heard one say, 'Ponz,' and like 'Lashley' or 'Leslie.'"

"Leslie was with Ponz, I told you," says the second.

"Yeah. So then they grabbed us again, and held on, and that was when they gave the treatment. I think something went into me, I can still hear like a voice. Ko says, him, too.... Oh, and there were young ones and some others running around on an island; they said they're not like them until they get the treatment. 'Drons,' they called the young ones. And afterward they're 'Ee-ah-drons.' The ones we talked to. It's sort of confusing. Like the Ee-ah are people, too. But you don't see them." His voice — it must be Boney — runs down. "Is that all?" Coati hears him ask aside.

"Yeah, I guess so," the other voice — Ko — replies. "We better get started, we got one more stop ... and I don't feel so good anymore. I wish we was home."

"Me, too. Funny, we felt so great. Well, DRS 914 B-K signing off.... I guess this is the longest record we ever sent, huh? Oh, we have some corrections to send. Stand by."

After a long drone of coordinate corrections, the record ends.

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Coati sits pensive, trying to sort out the account. It's clear that a new race has been contacted, and they seem friendly. Yet something about it affects her negatively — she has no desire to rush off and meet the big white six-legs and be given the "smart treatment." Boney and Ko were supposed to be a little — innocent. Maybe they were fooled in some way, taken advantage of? But she can't think why, or what. It's beyond her....

The other thing that's clear is that this should go to Base, fastest. Wasn't there a ship going to follow Boney and Ko's route? That would take them to the cat planet, which is at — she consults her wrist — thirty-twenty north, et cetera. Oh, dear, must she go back? Turn back, abort her trip to deliver this? Why had she been so smart, pulling in other people's business?

But wait. If it's urgent, she could speed it by calling Base and reading the message, thus bypassing the last leg. Then surely they wouldn't crack her for interfering! Maybe she's still in commo range.

She powers up the transponder and starts calling FedBase 900. Finally a voice responds, barely discernible through the noise. She fiddles with the suppressors and gets it a bit clearer.

"FedBase 900, this is *CC-One* at AL Beacon One. Do you read me? I have intercepted a message pipe from Supply Ship DRS 914 B-K, the missing ship, Boney and Ko." She repeats. "Do you read that?"

"Affirmative, *CC-One*. Message from ship 914 B-K intercepted. What is the message?"

"It's too long to read. But listen — important. They are on their way to a planet at — wait a minim—" She rolls the record back and gets the coordinates. "And before that they stayed at that planet thirty-twenty north - you have the specs. There are people there! It's a First Contact, I think. But listen, they say something's funny. I don't think you should go there until you get the whole message. I'm sending it right on."

"*CC-One,* I lost part of that. Is planet at thirty-twenty north a First Contact?"

Garble is breaking up Commo's voice. Coati shouts as clearly as she can, "Yes! Affirmative! But don't, repeat, do — not — go — there — until you get B-K's original message. I — will — send — pipe — at once. Did you get that?"

"Repeating. ... Do not proceed to planet thirty-twenty north, forty-two-twenty-eight west until B-K message received. Pipe coming soonest. Green, *CC-One*?"

"Go. If I can't make the pipe work, I'll bring it. *CC-One* signing off." She finishes in a swirl of loud static, and turns her attention to getting the pipe back on its way.

But before she takes the cassette out of the voder, she rechecks the

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designation of the planet B-K are headed for. Eighteen-ten north. Twenty-eight-thirty west. RD Thirty. That's closer than the First Contact planet; that's right, they said they'd stop there on their way home. She copies the first coordinates off on her workpad, and replaces them on her wrist with the new ones. If she wants to help look for Boney and Ko, she could go straight there — but of course she hasn't really made up her mind. As she rolls back her sleeve, she notices that her arm still feels odd, but she can't see any trace of a cold-burn. She rubs the arm a couple of times, and it goes away.

"Getting goosey from excitement," she mutters. She has a childish habit of talking aloud to herself when she's alone. She figures it's because she was alone so much as a child, happily playing with her space toys and holos.

Putting the message pipe back on course proves to be absurdly simple. She blows it clean of the yellow powdery stuff, reinserts the cassette, and ejects it beside the view-ports. Fascinated, she watches the little ship spin slowly, orienting to its homing frequency broadcast from Base 900. Then, as if satisfied, it begins to glide away, faster and faster. Sure enough, as well as she can judge, it's headed down the last leg from Beacon One to FedBase. Neat! She's never heard of pipes before; there must be all kinds of marvelous frontier gadgets that'll be new to her.

She has a guilty twinge as she sees it go. Isn't it her duty to go nearer back to Base and read the whole thing? Could the men be in some kind of trouble where every minim counts? But they sounded green, only maybe a little tired. And she understands it's their routine to send a pipe after every stop. If some of those corrections are important, she could never read them straight; her voice would give out. Better they have Boney's own report.

She turns back to figuring out her course, and finds she was fibbing: she has indeed made up her mind. She'll just go to the planet B-K were headed for and see if she can find them there. Maybe they got too sick to move on, maybe they found another alien race they got involved with. Maybe their ship's in trouble. ... Any number of reasons they could be late, and she *might* be helpful. And now she knows enough about the pipes to know that they can't be sent from a planet's surface. Only from above atmosphere. So if Boney and Ko can't lift, they can't message for help — by pipe, at least.

She's half-talking this line of reasoning out to herself as she works on the holocharts. Defining and marking in a brand-new course for the computer is far more work than she'd realized; the school problems she had done must have been chosen for easy natural corridors. "Oh, gods ... I've got to erase again; there's an asteroid path there. Help! I'll never get off this

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beacon at this rate — explorers must have spent half their time mapping!"

As she mutters, she becomes aware of something like an odd little echo in the ship. She looks around; the cabin is tightly packed with shiny cases of supplies. "Got my acoustics all buggered up," she mutters. That must be it. But there seems to be a peculiar delay; for example, she hears the word "Help!" so tiny-clear that she actually spends a few minim searching the nearby racks. Could a talking animal pet or something have got in at FarBase? Oh, the poor creature. Unless she can somehow get it in cold-sleep, it'll die.

But nothing more happens, and she decides it's just the new acoustical reflections. And at last she achieves a good, safe three-leg course to that system at eighteen-ten north. She's pretty sure an expert could pick out a shorter, elegant, two-leg line, but she doesn't want to risk being waked up by some unforeseen obstacle. So she picks routes lined by well-corrected red dwarfs and other barely visible sky features. These charts are living history, she thinks. Not like the anonymous holos back home, where everything is checked a hundred times a year, and they give you only trip-strips. In these charts she can read the actual hands of the old explorers. That man Ponz, for instance — he must have spent a lot of time working around the route to the yellow suns, before he landed on thirty-twenty and crashed and died. . . . But she's dawdling now. She stacks the marked cassettes in order in her computer take-up, and clicks the first one in. To the unknown, at last!

She readies her cold-sleep chest and hops in. As she relaxes, she notices she still has a strange sensation of being accompanied by something or someone. "Maybe because I'm sort of one of the company of space now," she tells herself romantically, and visualizes a future chart with a small "CC" correction. Hah! She laughs aloud, drowsily, in the darkness, feeling great. An almost physical rosy glow envelops her as she sinks to dreamless stasis.

She can take off thus unconscious amid pathless space with no real fear of getting lost and being unable to return, because of a marvelously simple little gadget carried by all jumpships — a time-lapse recorder in the vessel's tail, which clicks on unceasingly, recording the star scene behind. It's accelerated by motion in the field, and slows to resting state when the field is static. So, whenever the pilot wishes to retrace his route, he has only to take out the appropriate cassette and put it up front in his guidance computer. The computer will hunt until it duplicates the starfield sequences of the outward path, thus bringing the ship infallibly, if somewhat slowly, back along the course it came.

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She wakes and jumps out to see a really new star scene — a great sprawl of radiant golden suns against a very dark arm of Rift. The closest star of the group, she finds, is eighteen-ten north, just as she's calculated! The drive has cut off at the margin of its near gravity field; it will be a long thrust drive in.

Excitement like a sunrise is flooding her. She's made it! Her first solo jump!

And with the mental joy is still that physical glow, so strong it puzzles her for a minim. Physical, definitely; it's kind of like the buzz of self-stimulation, but without the sticky-sickly feeling that self-stimulation usually gives her. Their phys ed teacher, who'd showed them how to relieve sex tension, said that the negative quality would go away, but Coati hasn't bothered with it all that very much. Now she thinks that this shows that sheer excitement can activate sex, as the teacher said. "Ah, go away," she mutters impatiently. She's got to start thrust drive and run on in to where the planets could be.

As soon as she's started, she turns to the scope to check. Planets — yes! One — two — four — and there it is! Blue-green and white even at this distance! Boney and Ko had said it tested highly terraform. It looks it, all right, thinks Coati, who had seen only holos of antique Earth. She wonders briefly what the missing nonterraform part could be: irregularities of climate, absence of some major lifeforms? It doesn't matter — anything over 75 percent means livable without protective gear, air and water present and good. She'll be able to get out and explore in the greatest comfort — on a *new* world! But are Boney and Ko already there?

When she gets into orbital distance from the planet, she must run a standard search pattern around it. All Federation ships have radar-responsive gear to help locate them. But her little ship doesn't have a real Federation search-scope. She'll have to use her eyes, and fly much too narrow a course. This could be tedious; she sighs.

She finds herself crossing her legs and wriggling and scratching herself idly. Really, this sex overflow is too much! The mental part is fairly calm, though, almost like real happiness. Nice. Only distracting.... And, as she leans back to start waiting out the run in, she feels again that sense of *presence* in the ship. Company, companionship. Is she going a little nutters? "Calm down," she tells herself firmly.

A minim of dead silence ... into which a tiny, tiny voice says distinctly, "Hello ... hello? Please don't be frightened. Hello?"

It's coming from somewhere behind and above her.

Coati whirls, peers up and around everywhere, seeing nothing new.

"Wh-where are you?" she de-

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mands. "Who are you, in here?"

"I am a very small being. You saved my life. Please don't be frightened of me. Hello?"

"Hello," Coati replies slowly, peering around hard. Still she sees nothing. And the voice is still behind her when she turns. She doesn't feel frightened at all, just intensely excited and curious.

"What do you mean, I saved your life?"

"I was clinging to the outside of that artifact you call a message. I would have died soon."

"Well, good." But now Coati *is* a bit frightened. When the voice spoke, she definitely detected movement in her own larynx and tongue — as if she were speaking the words herself. Gods — she *is* going nutters, she's hallucinating! "I'm talking to myself!"

"No, no," the voice — her voice — reassures her. "You are correct —I am using your speech apparatus. Please forgive me; I have none of my own that you could hear."

Coati digests this dubiously. If this is a hallucination, it's really complex. She's never done anything like this before. Could it be real, some kind of alien telekinesis?

"But where are you? Why don't you come out and show yourself?"

"I can't. I will explain. Please promise me you won't be frightened. I have damaged nothing, and I will leave anytime you desire."

Coati suddenly gets an idea, and eyes the computer sharply. In fantasy shows she's seen holos about alien minds taking over computers. So far as she knows, it's never happened in reality. But maybe—

"Are you in my computer?"

"Your computer?" Incredibly, the voice gives what might almost be a giggle. "In a way, yes. I told you I am very, very small. I am in empty places, in your head." Quickly it adds, "You aren't frightened, please? I can go out anytime. but then we can't speak."

"In my head!" Coati exclaims. For some reason she, too, feels like laughing. She knows she should be making some serious response, but all she can think of is, this is why her sinuses feel stuffy. "How did you get in my head?"

"When you rescued me I was incapable of thought. We have a primitive tropism to enter a body and make our way to the head. When I came to myself, I was here. You see, on my home we live in the brains of our host animals. In fact, we are their brains."

"You went through my body? Oh — from that place on my arm?"

"Yes, I must have done. I have only vague, primitive memories. You see, we are really so small. We live in what I think you call intermolecular, maybe interatomic spaces. Our passage doesn't injure anything. To me, your body is as open and porous as your landscape is to you. I didn't

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realize there was so much large-scale solidity around until I saw it through your eyes! Then, when you went cold, I came to myself and learned my way around, and deciphered the speech centers. I had a long, long time. It was ... lonely. I didn't know if you would ever awaken. ..."

"Yeah. ..." Coati thinks this over. She's pretty sure she couldn't imagine all this. It must be *real*! But all she can think of to say is, "You're using my eyes, too?"

"I've tapped into the optic nerve, at the second juncture. *Very* delicately, I assure you. And to your auditory channels. It's one of the first things we do, a primitive program. And we make the host feel happy, to keep from frightening it. You do feel happy, don't you?"

"Happy? —Hey, are *you* doing that? Listen, if that's you, you're overdoing it! I don't want to feel quite so 'happy,' as you call it. Can you turn it down?"

"You don't? Oh, I *am* sorry. Please wait — my movements are slow."

Coati waits, thinking so furiously about everything at once that her mind is a chaos. Presently there comes a marked decrease in the distracting physical glow. More than all the rest, this serves to convince her of the reality of her new inhabitant.

"Can you read my mind?" she asks slowly.

"Only when you form words," her own voice replies. "Subvocalizing, I think you call it. I used all that long cold time tracing out your vocabulary and language. We have a primitive drive to communication; perhaps all life-forms have."

"Acquiring a whole language from a static, sleeping brain is quite a feat," says Coati thoughtfully. She is beginning to feel a distinct difference in her voice when the alien is using it; it seems higher, tighter — and she hears herself using words that she knows only from reading, not habitual use.

"Yes. Luckily I had so much time. But I was so dismayed and depressed when it seemed you'd never awaken. All that work would be for nothing. I am so happy to find you alive! Not just for the work, but for — for life. ... Oh, and I have had one chance to practice with your species before. But your brain is quite different."

However flustered and overwhelmed by the novelty of all this, Coati isn't stupid. The words about "home" and "hosts" are making a connection with Boney and Ko's report.

"Did the two men who sent that message you were riding on visit your home planet? They were two Humans — that's what I am — in a ship bigger than this."

"Oh, yes! I was one of those who took turns being with them! And I was visiting one of them when they left." ... The voice seems to check itself. "Your brain is really very different."

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"Thanks," says Coati inanely. "I've heard that those two men — those two Humans — weren't regarded as exactly bright."

"'Bright?' Ah, yes. ... We performed some repairs, but we couldn't do much."

Coati's chaotic thoughts coalesce. What she's sitting here chatting with is an alien — an *alien* who is possibly deadly, very likely dangerous, who has invaded her head.

"You're a *brain parasite!*" she cries loudly. "You're an intelligent brain parasite, using my eyes to see with and my ears to hear with, and talking through my mouth as if I were a zombie — and, and for all I know, you're taking over my whole brain!

"Oh, please! P-please!" She hears her own voice tremble. "I can leave at any moment — is that what you wish? And I damage nothing — nothing at all. I use very little energy. In fact, I have cleared away some debris in your main blood-supply tube, so there is more than ample for us both. I need only a few components from time to time. But I can withdraw right now. It would be a slow process, because I've become more deeply enmeshed and my mentor isn't here to direct me. But if that's what you want, I shall start at once, leaving just as I came.... Maybe — n-now that I'm refreshed, I could survive longer, clinging to your ship."

The pathos affects Coati; the timbre of the voice calls up the image of a tiny, sad, frightened creature shivering in the cold prison of space.

"We'll decide about that later," she says somewhat gruffly. "Meanwhile I have your word of honor you aren't messing up my brain?"

"Indeed not," her own voice whispers back indignantly. "It is a beautiful brain."

"But what do you want? Where are you trying to go?"

"Now I want only to go home. I thought, if I could reach some central Human place, we could find someone who would carry me back to my home planet and my proper host."

"But why did you leave Boney and Ko and go with that message pipe in the first place?"

"Oh — I had no idea then how *big* the empty spaces are; I thought it would be like a long trip out-of-body at home. Brrr-rr! There's so much I don't know. Can you tell that I am quite a young being? I have not at all finished my instructions. My mentors tell me I am foolish, or foolhardy. I — I wanted adventure?" The little voice sounds suddenly quite strong and positive. "I still do, but I see I must be better prepared."

"Hmm. Hey, can you tell I'm young, too? I guess that makes two of us. I guess I'm out here looking for adventure, too."

"You do understand"

"Yeah." Coati grins, sighs. "Well, I can carry you back to FedBase, and

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I'm sure they'll be sending parties to your planet soon. It's a First Contact for us, you know; that's what we call meeting a new non-Human race. We know about fifty so far, but no one just like you. So I'm certain people will be going."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so much."

Coati feels a surge of physical pleasure, an urge—

"Hey, you're doing *that* again! Stop it."

"Oh, I am sorry." The glow fades. "It's a primitive response to gratitude. To give pleasure. You see, our normal hosts are quite mindless; they can be thanked only by physical sensation."

"I see." Pondering this, Coati sees something else, too.

"I suppose you could make them feel pain, too, to punish them, if they did something you didn't like?"

"I suppose so. But we don't like pain; it churns up the delicate brain. Those are some of the lessons I haven't had yet. I had to only once, when my host was playing too near a dangerous cliff. And then I soothed it with pleasure right after it moved back. We use it only in emergencies, if the host threatens to harm itself, rare things like that. ... Or, wait, I remember, if the host gets into what you call a *fight*. ... You can see it's complicated."

"I see," Coati repeats. Uneasily she realizes that this young alien passenger might have more control over her than was exactly neat. But it seems to be so well-meaning, to have no intent at all to harm her. She relaxes — unable to suppress a twinge of wonder whether her easy emotional acceptance of its presence in — whew! — her brain might not be a feeling partly engineered by the alien. Maybe the *really* neat thing to do would be to ask her passenger to withdraw, right now. Could she fix some comfortable place for it to stay outside her? Maybe she'll do that, when they get a bit closer to FedBase.

Meanwhile, what about her plan for visiting the planet Boney and Ko were headed for? If she could pick up a trace of them, it would be a real help to FedBase. And wouldn't it be a shame to come all this way without taking a look?

That argument with herself is soon over. And her young appetite is making itself felt. She picks out a ration snack and starts to set the drive course for the planets, explaining between munches what she plans to do before returning to FedBase. Her passenger raises no objection to this delay.

"I am so grateful, so grateful you would think to deliver me," her voice says with some difficulty around the cheese bites.

As Coati opens the cold-keeper, a flash of gold attracts her attention. It's more of that gold dust, clinging to the chilly surface. She bats it away,

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and some floats to her face.

"By the way, what is this stuff? It came in the message pipe, with you. Can you see it? Hey, it's on my legs, too." She extends one.

"Yes," her "different" voice replies. "They are seeds."

She's getting used to this weird dialogue with herself. It reminds her of a show she saw, where a ventriloquist animated a dummy. "I'm a ventriloquist's dummy," she chuckles to herself. "Only I'm the ventriloquist, too."

"What kind of seeds, of what?" she asks aloud.

"Ours." There's a sound, or feeling, like a sigh, as if a troubling thought had passed. Then the voice says more briskly, "Wait, I forgot. I should release a chemical to keep them off you. They are attracted to —to the pheromones of life."

"I didn't know I knew those words," Coati tells her invisible companion. "I guess you were really into my vocabulary while I slept."

"Oh, yes. I labored."

A moment later Coati feels a slight flush prickling her skin. Is this the "chemical"? Before she can feel alarmed, it passes. And she sees that the floating dust — or seeds — has fallen away from her as if repelled by a charge.

"Good-o." She eats a bit more, finishing the course-set. "That reminds me, what do you call your race? And you, you must have a name. We should get better acquainted!" She laughs for two; all sense of trouble has gone.

"I am of the Eea, or Eeadron. Personally I'm called Syllobene."

"Hello, Syllobene! I'm Coati Cass. Coati."

"Hello, Coati Cass Coati."

"No, I meant, just Coati. Cass is my family name."

"Ah, 'family.' We wondered about that, with the other Humans."

"Sure, I'll be glad to explain. But later—" Coati cuts herself off. "I mean, there'll be plenty of time to explain everything while we slowly approach the planet orbiting that star. And I think I'm entitled to your story first, Syllobene, since I'm providing the body. Don't you agree that's fair?"

"Oh, yes. I must take care not to be selfish, when you do so much."

Somehow this speech for the first time conveys to Coati that her passenger really is a young, almost childish being. The big words it had found in her mind had kept misleading her. But now Syllobene sounds so much like herself reminding herself of her manners. She chuckles again, benignly. Could it be that they are two kids — even two females — together, out looking for adventure in the starfields? And it's nice to have this unexpected companion; much as Coati loves to read and view, she's beginning to get the idea that a lot of space voyaging consists of lonely sitting and waiting, when you aren't in cold-sleep. Of course, she guiltily re-

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minds herself, she could be checking the charts to see if all the coordinates of the relatively few stars out here are straight. But Boney and Ko have undoubtedly done all that — after all, this was their second trip to this sun; on the first one they merely spotted planets. And learning about an alien race is surely important.

She leans back comfortably and asks, "Now, what about your planet? What does it look like? And your hosts — how does that work? How did such a system ever evolve in the first place? Hey, I know — can you make me see an image, a vision of your home?"

"Alas, no. Such a feat is beyond my powers. Making speech is the utmost I can do."

"Well, tell me about it all."

"I will. But first I must say, we have no such — no such material equipment, no such *technology* as you have. What techniques we have are of the mind. I am filled with amazement at all you do. Your race has achieved marvels! I saw a distant world when I looked through your device — a world! And you speak of visiting it as casually as we would go to a lake or a tree farm. A wonder!"

"Yes, we have lot of technology. So do some other races, like the Swain and the Moom. But I want *yours*, Syllobene! To start with, what's this business of Eea and Eeadron?"

"Ah. Yes, of course. Well, I personally, just myself, am an Eea. But when I am in my proper host, which is a Dron. I am an Eeadron. An Eea by itself is almost nothing. It can do nothing but wait, depending on its primitive tropisms, until a host comes by. It is very rare for Eea to become detached as you found me — except when we are visiting another Eeadron for news or instruction. And then we leave much of ourselves in place, in our personal Dron, to which we return. I, being young, was able to detach myself almost completely to go with the Humans as one of their visitors."

"Oh — were there other Eea inside Boney and Ko when they took off?"

"Yes — one each, at least."

"What would you call that — Eeahumans?" Coati laughs.

But her companion does not seem to join in. "They were very old," she hears herself mutter softly. And then something that sounds like, "no idea of the length of the trip. ..."

"So you came away when they messaged. Whew — wild act! Oh, Syllobene, I'm so glad I intercepted it and saved you."

"I too, dear Coati Cass."

"But now we've got to get serious about this crazy system of yours. Are you the only people on your planet that have their brains in separate bodies? — Oh, wait. I just realized we should record all this; we'll never be able to go over it twice. Hold while I put in a new cassette."

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She gets set up, and bethinks herself to make it sound professional with an introduction.

"This is Coati Cass recording, on board the CC-One, approaching unnamed planet at—" She gives all the coordinates, the standard date and time, and the fact that Boney and Ko were last reported to be headed toward this planet.

"Before that they landed on a planet at thirty-twenty north and reported a First Contact with life-forms there. Their report is in a message forwarded to Base before I came here. Now it seems that when they left that planet, some of the life-forms came with them; specifically, two at least of the almost invisible Eea, in their heads. And some seeds, and another Eea, a very young one, who came along, she says, for the adventure. This young Eea moved to the message pipe, not realizing how long the trip would be, and was almost dead when I opened the pipe. She — I call it 'she' because we haven't got sexes, if any, straightened out yet — she moved over to me when I opened the pipe, and is right now residing in my head, where she can see and hear through my senses, and speak with my voice. I am interviewing her about her planet, Nolian. Now remember, all the voice you hear will be mine — but I myself am the one asking the questions. I think you will soon be able to tell when Syllobene — that's her name — is speaking with my voice; it's higher and sort of constricted, and she uses words I didn't know I knew. She learned all that while I was in cold-sleep coming here. Now, Syllobene, would you please repeat what you've told me so far, about the Eea and the Eeadron?"

Coati has learned to relax a little while her own voice goes on, and she hears Syllobene start with a nice little preface: "Greetings to my Human hearers!" and go on to recite the Eea-Eeadron system.

"Now," says Coati, "I was just asking her whether the Eea are the only life-forms on their planet to have their brains in separate animals, so to speak?"

"Oh, no," says her Syllobene voice, "it is general in our, ah, animal world. In fact, we are still amazed that there is another way. But always in other animals, the two are very closely attached. For instance, in the Enquaalons the En is born with the Quaalon, mates when it mates, gives birth when it does, and dies when it dies. The same for all the En — that is what we call the brain animal — except for ourselves, the Eea. Only the Eea are so separate from the Dron, and do not die when their Dron dies. ... But we have seen aged Endalamines — that is the nearest animal to the Eeadron — holding their heads against newborn Dalamines, as though the En were striving to pass to a new body, while the seed-Ens proper to that newborn hovered about in frus-

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tration. We think in some cases they succeed."

"So you Eea can pass to a new body when yours is old! Does that make you immortal?"

"Ah, no; Eea, too, age and die. But very slowly. They may use many Dron in a lifetime."

"I see. But tell about your society, your government, and how you get whatever you eat, and so on. Are there rich or poor, or servants and master Eeadron?"

"No, if I understand those words. But we have farms—"

And so, by random stages and probings, Coati pieces together a picture of the green and golden planet Syllobene calls Nolian, with its sun Anella. All ruled over by the big white Eeadron, who have no wars, and only the most rudimentary monetary system. The climate is so benign that housing is largely decorative, except for shelter from the nightly mists and drizzles. It seems a paradise. Their ferocious teeth, which had so alarmed Boney and Ko, derive from a forgotten, presumably carnivorous past; they now eat plant products and fruits. (Here Coati recollects that certain herbivorous primates of antique Earth also had fierce-looking canines.)

As to material technology, the Eeadron have the wheel, which they use for transporting farm crops and what few building materials they employ. And long ago they learned to control fire, which they regard almost as a toy except for some use in cooking. Their big interest now appears to be the development of a written code for their language; they picked up the idea from Ponz and Leslie. It's a source of great pleasure and excitement, although some of the older Eea, who serve as the racial memory, grumble a bit at this innovation.

Midway through this account, Coati has an idea, and when Syllobene runs down, she bursts out, "Listen! Oh — this is Coati speaking — you said you cleaned out my arteries, my blood tubes. And you cure other hosts. Would you — I mean, your race — be interested in being healers to other races like mine, who can't heal themselves? We call such healers *doctors*. But our doctors can't get inside and really fix what's wrong, without cutting the sick person up. Why, you could travel all over the Federation, visiting sick people and curing them — or, wait, you could set up a big clinic, and people, Humans and others, would come from everywhere to have the Eea go into them and fix their blood vessels, or their kidneys, or whatever was wrong. Oh, hey, and they'd *pay* you — You're going to need Federation credits — and everybody would love you! You'd be the most famous, valuable race in the Federation!"

"Oh, oh—" replies the Syllobene voice, sounding breathless, "I don't know your exclamations! We would say—" She gives an untranslatable

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trill of excitement. "How amazing, if I understand you—"

"Well, we can talk about that later. Now, you learned about Humans from what you call visiting, in the brains of Boney or Ko, is that right?"

"Yes. But if I had not had the experience of visiting my mentor and a few other Eeadron, I would not have known how to enter and live there without causing damage. You see, the brains of the Dron are just unformed matter; one can go anywhere and eat anything without ill effect on the host's brain. In fact, it is up to the Eea to form them. ... And, I almost forgot, my mentor was old; and was one of those who had known the living Humans Ponz and Leslie. The two who landed violently and died. They were beyond our powers to cure then, but we could abolish their pain. I believe they mated before they died, but no seeds came. My mentor told me how your brains are developed and functioning. We are still amazed."

"Why do you visit other Eeadron?"

"To learn many facts about some subject in a short time. We send out tendrils — I think you have a word, for your fungus plants — mycelia. Very frail threads and knots, permeating the other brain — I believe that is what I look like in your brain now —and by making a shadow pattern in a certain way, we acquire all sorts of information, like history, or the form of landscapes, and keep it intact when we withdraw."

"Look, couldn't you learn all about Humans and the Federation by doing that in my head?"

"Oh, I would not dare. Your speech centers alone frightened me with their complexity. I proceeded with infinite care. It was lucky I had so much time while you slept. I wouldn't dare try anything more delicate and extensive and emotion-connected."

"Well, thanks for your consideration..." Coati doesn't want to stall the interview there, so she asks at random, "Do you have any social problems? Troubles or dilemmas that concern your whole race?"

This seems to puzzle the Eea. "Well. If I understand you, I don't think so. Oh, there is a heated disagreement among two groups of Eeadron as to how much interest we should take in aliens, but that has been going on ever since Ponz. A panel of senior councillors — is that the word for old wise ones? — is judging it."

"And will the factions abide by the panel's judgment?"

"Oh, naturally. It will be wiped from memory."

"Whew!"

"And ... and there is the problem of a shortage of *faleth* fruit trees. But that is being solved. Oh — I believe I know one social problem, as you put it. Since the Eea are becoming personally so long-lived, there is arising a reluctance to mate and start young.

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Mating is very, ah, disruptive, especially to the Dron body. So people like to go along as they are. The elders have learned how to suppress the mating urge. For example, I and my siblings were the only young born during one whole season. There are still plenty of seeds about — you saw them — but they are becoming just wasted. Wasted ... I think I perceive something applicable in your verbal sayings, about nature."

"Huh? Oh — 'Nature's notorious wastefulness,' right?"

"Yes. But our seeds are very long-lived. Very. And that golden coat, which is what you see, is impervious to most everything. So maybe all will be well."

Her informant seems to want to say no more on this topic, so Coati seizes the pause to say, "Look, our throat — *my* throat — is about to close up or break into flames. Water!" She seizes the flask and drinks. "I always thought that business of getting a sore throat from talking too much was a joke. It isn't. Can't you *do* something, Dr. Syllobene?"

"I can only block off some of the inflamed channels, and help time do its work. I could abolish the pain, but if we use the throat, it would quickly grow much worse."

"You sound like a doctor already," Coati grumbles hoarsely. "Well, we'll just cut this off here — Oh, I wish I had one of those message pipes! Ouch. ... Then we'll have some refreshments — I got some honey, thank the gods — and take a nap. Cold-sleep doesn't rest us, you know. Could you take a sleep, too, Syllobene?"

"Excellent idea." That hurts.

"Look, couldn't you learn just to nod my head like this for 'yes' or like this for 'no'?"

Nothing happens for a moment, then Coati feels her head nod gently as if elfin fingers were brushing her chin and brow, yes.

"Fantastic," she rasps. "Ouch."

She clicks off the recorder, takes a last look through the scope at the blue-green-white planet — still far, far ahead — sets an alarm, and curls up comfortably in the pilot couch.

"Sleep well, Syllobene," she whispers painfully. The answer is breathed back, "You, too, dear Coati Cass."

Excitement wakes her before the alarm. The planet is just coming into good bare-eye view. But when she starts to speak to Syllobene, she finds she has no voice at all. She hunts up the med-aid kit and takes out some throat lozenges.

"Syllobene," she whispers. "Hello?"

"Wha—er, what? Hello?" Syllobene discovers whispering.

"We've lost our voice. That happens sometimes. It'll wear off. But if it's still like this when we get on the planet, you'll *have* to do something so we can record. You can, can't you?"

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"Yes, I believe so. But you must understand it will make it worse later."

"Green."

"What?"

"Green ... means 'I understand, too.' Listen, I'm sorry about your turn to ask questions. That'll be later. For now we'll just shut up."

"I wait."

"Go."

"What?"

"Oh, green, go — that means 'Understood, and we will proceed on that course.'" Coati can scarcely force out the words.

"Ah, informal speech ... most difficult. ..."

"Syl, this is killing me. We shut up *now*, green?"

A painful giggle. "Go."

Some hot tea from the snack pack proves soothing. Meanwhile the enforced silence for the first time gives Coati a chance to think things over. She is, of course, entranced by the novelty of it all, and seriously stirred by the idea that Syllobene's race could provide the most astounding, hitherto inconceivable type of medical help to the others. If they want to. And if a terrible crowd-jam doesn't ensue. But that's for the big minds to wrestle out.

And, like the kid she is, Coati relishes the sensation she fancies her return will provoke — with a real live new alien carried in her head! But, gods, they won't be able to *see* Syllobene — suppose they jump to the obvious conclusion that Coati's gone nutters, and hustle her off to the hospital? She and Syl better talk that over before they get home; Syllobene has to be able to think of some way to prove she exists.

Funny how firmly she's thinking of Syllobene as "she," Coati muses. Is that just sheer projection? Or — after all, they're in pretty intimate contact — is this some deep instinctive perception, like one of Syl's "primitive tropisms"? Whatever, when they get it unscrambled, it'll be a bit of a shock if Syl's a young "he" ... or, gods forbid, an "it" or a "them." What was it that Boney had said about the Dron, that some of them had two sets of "private parts"? That'd be his modest term for sex organs; he must have meant they were like hermaphrodites. Whew. Well, that still doesn't necessarily mean anything about the Eea.

When they can talk, she must get things straightened out. And until then not get too romantically fixated on the idea that they're two girls together.

All this brings her to a sobering sense of how little she really knows about the entity she's letting stay in her head — in her very brain. If indeed Syl was serious about being able to leave. ... With this sobriety comes — or rather, surfaces — a slight, undefined sense of *trouble*. She's had it all along, Coati realizes. A peculiar feeling that there's more. That all

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isn't quite being told her. Funny, she doesn't suspect Syl herself of some bad intent, of being secretly evil. No. Syllobene is *good,* as good as she can be; all Coati's radar and perceptions seem to assure her of that. But nevertheless this feeling persists — it's becoming clearer as she concentrates — that something was making the alien a little sad and wary now and then — that something troubling to Syl had been touched on but not explored.

The lords know, she and Syl had literally talked all they could; Syl had answered every question until their voice gave out. But Coati's sense of incompleteness lingers. Let's see, when had it been strongest? ... Around that business of the seeds in the message pipe, for one. Maybe every time they touched on seeds. Well, seeds were being wasted. That meant dying. And a seed is a living thing; an encysted, complete beginning of a new life. Not just a gamete, like pollen, say. Maybe they're like embryos, or even living babies, to Syllobene. The thought of hundreds of doomed babies surely wouldn't be a very cheerful one for Coati herself.

Could that be it? That Syl didn't want to go into the sadness? Seems plausible. Or, wait — what about Syl herself? By any chance did she want to mate, and now she can't — or *had* she, and that's the mystery of where those seeds in the message pipe had come from? Whew! Is Syl old enough, is she sexually mature? Somehow Coati doesn't think so, but again, she knows so little — not even that Syl's a she.

As Coati ruminates, her eyes have been on the front view-ports, where the planet is rapidly growing bigger and bigger. She must put her wonderment aside, with the mental note to question Syl at the first opportunity. In a few minim it'll be time to kill the torches and go on antigrav for the maneuvers that will bring her into a close-orbit search pattern. She will have to fly a lot of extra orbits, doing the best she can by eye and with her narrow little civilian radarscope. It'll be tedious; not for the first time, she deplores the unsuitability of a little space-coupe for serious exploration work.

The planet still looks remarkably like holos of Terra. It has two big ice caps, but only three large landmasses set in blue ocean. It looks cold, too. Cloud cover is thin, wispy cirrus. And for many degrees south of the northern ice, the land is a flat gray-green, featureless except for an intricate, shallow lake system, which changes from silver to black as the angle of reflection changes. Like some exotic silken fabric, Coati thinks. The technical name for such a plain is tundra, or maybe muskeg.

No straight lines or curves, no dams, no signs of artificial works appear. The place seems devoid of intelligent life.

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Hello, what's this ahead? A twinkling light is rounding the shadowed curve of the planet, far enough out to catch the sun. That's reflected light; the thing is tumbling slowly. Coati slows and turns to the scope. Big sausage tanks! Such tanks must belong to a DRS, a depot resupply ship. Boney and Ko must have left them in orbit before they landed. And they wouldn't fail to pick them up when they left; that means the men are here. Oh, good. That'll give her the enthusiasm to sit out a long, boring search.

She tunes up every sensor on *CC-One* and starts the pattern while she's still, really, too far out. This is going to be a long chore, unless some really wild luck strikes.

And luck does strike! On her second figure eight orbit, she sees an immense blackened swath just south of the northern ice cap. A burn. Can it have been caused by lightning, or volcanism? Or even a natural meteorite?

No ... on the next pass she can see a central line of scorch, growing as it leads north, with a perceptible zigzag such as no incoming natural object could make. She clicks on the recorder and whisperingly reports the burn and the tanks in orbit.

On the third pass she's sure. There's a gleam at the north end of the burn scar.

"Oh, the poor men! They must have been sick; they had to correct course with rockets. ... Syl! Syllobene! Are you awake?"

"Uh — hello?" her voice mumbles. Funny to hear herself sounding sleepy.

"Look, you have to do something about our throat so I can report. I think I've found the men."

"Oh. Yes. Wait ... I fear I need nourishment. ..."

"Go right ahead. Be my guest."

For an instant Coati pictures Syl sipping blood, like a vampire; but no, Syl is too small. It'll be more like the little being snagging a red blood corpuscle or two as they rush by. Weird. Coati doesn't feel the least bit nervous about this. Syl had said she's increased the blood flow overall. And in fact Coati herself feels great, very alert and well. They *would* make wonderful healers, she thinks.

The gleam at the end of the burn is definitely a ship; the scope shows her a big Federation supply tug. Her calls on Fed frequencies bring no response. She kills the search pattern and prepares to land on antigrav. The plain beside the strange ship looks good. But maybe there was another reason for their use of torches, she thinks; those two men were superexperienced planetary pilots. Maybe this place has weird mascons or something that had to be corrected for? She'd better keep alert, and be ready to torch if she finds her course going unsteady.

When she calls the supply ship

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again, her voice is back and her throat suddenly feels great.

"Hey, thanks Syl."

"Coati, why are we landing?"

"The Humans you left are down somewhere on the planet. They were never heard of after you left them; they're officially missing. That means, everybody search. Now I've found their ship, but they don't answer. I have to land and find out what's happened to them. So you'll get to see a strange planet."

The news doesn't seem to cheer her little passenger, who only repeats, "We must land?"

"Oh, yes. Among other things, they may need help."

"Help. ..." Syllobene's voice repeats, with an odd, almost bitter inflection.

But Coati is too busy to brood over this. "What condition were they in when you left them, Syl?"

"Oh. ..." her throat sighs. "I do not know your race well enough to tell what is normal. They were speaking of going to cold-sleep when I withdrew and left them. I was trying to hurry because I understood that the message device would soon be sent out. As I said, it's a slow process. As soon as I was dependent on my Eea senses, the men were too large to perceive — for example, I could no longer discern the sound waves of their voices."

Coati thinks this over as she gentles the ship down through thick atmosphere. Her ablation shielding isn't all that good.

"Syl, you have just as much technology in your way as we do. Imagine going back and forth from the molecular to the molar scales!"

"Yes. It *is* a big learning. Very frightening the first time, when we're taught to visit."

"You said there were other Eea in Boney and Ko?"

"Yes ... but I couldn't establish good contact, and they controlled everything. That's why I slipped away, when I understood about the message device."

Coati grins. "I can understand that, Syl. But you took an awful chance."

She feels the elfin hands nod her head emphatically. "You are my savior."

"Oh, well. I didn't know it. But if I had known it, I would have got you off there, Syllobene. I *couldn't* have let you die in space."

A feeling of indefinable warmth and real happiness glows within her. Coati understands. There is genuine friendship between her and her tiny alien passenger.

The recorder has been clicking away as they talked. But of course it won't show her feelings. Pity.

"Just for the record," she says formally, "I have, uh, subjective reasons to believe that this alien has sincere feelings of friendship for me. I mean for me, not just as a convenience. I think that's important. I feel

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the same toward Syl."

It's time to set *CC-One* down. With all care, Coati jockeys her little ship in above the big supply tug and comes down neatly beside it. Nothing untoward shows up. That must mean that Boney and/or Ko were really in wobbly condition when they came in.

The atmosphere tests out green, but still she suits up for her first trip out. As her ports open, she gets her first good look at the DRS.

"Their ramp's down," she tells the 'corder. "And, hey, the port's ajar! Not good. I'm going in. ... Hello! Hello in there! ... Oh!"

Her voice breaks off. Sounds of footsteps, squeaks of ports being pulled.

"Oh, my. What a mess. There were gloves on the ramp — and the inside looks like they didn't clean anything up for a long time. I see food dishes and cassettes and a suit — wait, two suits — in a heap on the deck, as if they'd just jumped out of them. Oh, dear, this looks like trouble ... I think somebody threw up here. ... There're a lot of those goldy seeds around everywhere, too."

She prowls the cabin, reporting as she checks the sleep chests and anyplace a man-sized body could be. Nothing. And the big cargo hold is empty, too, except for a carton of supplies bound somewhere.

She comes outside, saying, "I think I should try to find them. The ground here is soft, like peat, with low vegetation or whatever, and I can see trampled places. There's one big place that looks like a trail leading" — she checks her bearings — "leading north, of all things. The atmosphere is highly Human-compatible, lots of oxy. I have my helmet off. So I'm going to try to follow their trail. But just in case I get into trouble, I think I better send this record off first. It has all about Syl's planet on it. Lords, I wish I could send it from the surface. I guess I'll have to lift above atmosphere. I'm taking some of their message pipes over to my ship. So here goes. It's the only neat thing to do."

She sighs, clicks off, and gets back into her ship.

Preparing to lift off, she says, "You're very quiet, Syllobene. Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes. But I am — I am afraid."

"Afraid of what? Walking around on a strange planet? Listen, I do have a hand weapon in case we run into big, wild, vicious beasts. But I don't think there's anything like that around here. Nothing for a carnivore to eat."

"No ... I am not afraid of the planet. I fear ... what you will find."

Coati is maneuvering her ship up for a fast single orbit and return. "What do you mean, Syl?" she asks a trifle absently.

"Coati, my friend" — it sounds weird to hear her name in her own voice — "I wish to wait until you search. Perhaps I am wrong. I hope so.

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"Well-ll, green, if you must," Coati is preoccupied with opening a message pipe. "Oh, bother, there're some of those little yellow dust seeds in here. How do I clear them out? I don't want to kill them — you say they can live in space, like you — but I don't think they should get loose in FedBase, do you?"

"No! No!"

"Look, I'm sorry about your seeds. I just want to make them get out of this pipe. How do I do that?"

"Heat. High heat."

"Huh ... oh, I know." She clicks the recorder on and tells it what she's doing. "I'm going to put the pipe in my food heater and run the heater up to 120 degrees C. That won't hurt the cassette. ... All right, I'm taking it out with tongs. By the gods, there're a couple of those seeds coming out of the 'corder as it gets near heat. All out, you. I will now end this record as I remove the cassette to send. *CC-One* signing off, before returning to planet to search for B and K."

"Good thing we did that," she tells Syl as she closes the pipe and puts it in the lock to be blown out. "Here goes the air. — And there goes the pipe! I hope the Base frequency reaches this far. ... Yes, it does. Neat, how the little thing knows where to go. Bye-bye, you. ... Funny, I'm getting a feeling like we're a long, long ways from anywhere. Being a space adventurer can be a trifle spooky." She noses the ship over into landing mode, thinking, "I'm going down to hike over a strange planet looking for two people who, face it, may be dead. ..."

"Syllobene?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really glad I have you for a friend here. Hey, maybe there's another thing your people could do ... I mean, for credits: Going with lonely space people on long trips!"

"Ah. ..."

"I was just joking. ... Or was I?"

Soon they are back on the planet, beside the abandoned DRS. Coati puts on planetary weather gear and tramping shoes. It's sunny but bleak outside. She packs a week's rations and some water, although the ground is spongy-wet. Then she clips the recorder to her shoulder and carefully loads it with a fresh cassette.

A long time later, after Coati has been officially declared missing, that same fresh cassette, its shine somewhat dimmed, is in the hands of the deputy to the exec of FedBase 900. It is about to be listened to by a group of people in the exec's conference room.

Weeks before, the message that Coati had lifted off-planet to send had arrived at FedBase. The staff has heard all about Syllobene and the Eea, and the Eeadron, and the Dron, and all the other features of Syllobene's planet Nolian, and her short trip with Boney and Ko; they have left Coati

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and her brain passenger about to go back down to the unnamed planet on which sits Boney and Ko's empty ship.

One of the group of listeners now is not of FedBase.

When that first message had come in, the exec had signaled the Cass family, and Coati's father is now in the room. He looks haggard; he has worn out his vocabulary of anger — particularly when he found that no rescue mission was being planned.

"Very convenient for you, Commander," he had sneered. "Letting a teenage girl do your dirty work. I say it's your responsibility to look for your own missing men, and to go get my daughter out of there and free her from that damn brain parasite. You should never have let her go way out there in the first place! If you think I'm not going to report this—"

"How do you suggest I could have stopped her, Myr Cass? She injected herself of her free will into an ongoing search, without consulting anyone. If anyone is to blame for her being out here, it's you. It was your responsibility to have some control over your daughter's travels in that ship you gave her. Meanwhile my responsibility is to my people, and I'm not justified in risking another ship pursuing a Federation citizen on her voluntary travels."

"But that cursed alien in her—"

"Yes. To be blunt about it, Myr Cass, your daughter is already infected, if that's the word, and she has given us evidence of the great mobility and potential for contagion of these small beings. We have probably already lost the men who first visited them. Now I suggest we quiet down and listen to what your daughter has to say. It may be that your concerns are baseless."

Grumblingly, Cass senior subsides.

"This message pipe has been heated, too," says the deputy. "The plastic shows it. From which we can infer that she was compos mentis and possibly in her own ship when she sent it."

The recording starts with a few miscellaneous bangs and squeaks.

"I've decided to take another look at B-K's ship before I start," Coati's voice says. "Maybe they left a message or something."

The 'corder clicks off and on again.

"I've been hunting around in here," says Coati. "No message I can see. There's a holocam focused on the cabin, but it's been turned off. Hey, I bet the Feds like to keep an eye on things, for cases like this. I'll root around by the shell."

Clicks — off, on.

"I've spotted what I think is another holocam up in the bow; I heard it click. ... How can I get at it? Oh, wait, maybe from outside." Off, on. "Yo-ho! I got it. It's in time-lapse mode; I think it caught the terrain around the ship. We'll just take it over to my ship and run it."

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Click—off.

Exec shifts uneasily. "I believe she's discovered the planetary recorder. I'm not sure the two men knew it was there."

"That must be the additional small cassette in this pipe," the deputy says.

The recorder has come on. "It's really small," Coati is saying. "Hey, it's full of your seeds, Syllobene. Those things must like cassettes. I'm threading it — here we go. Oh, my, oh, my — Syllobene!"

"That is my home," says Coati in what they have come to recognize as the voice of the alien speaking through Coati's throat. "Oh, my beautiful home! ... But what a marvel, how do you—"

"Later," Coati cuts herself off. "Later we'll look at it all you want. Right now we have to run it ahead to where it shows this planet and maybe the two men we're looking for."

"Yes — Oh, that was my mentor—"

"Oh, gods, I'd love to look. But I'm speeding up now." Sounds of fast clicking, incoherent small sounds from Coati's Syllobene voice.

"See, now they've taken off. It'll be stars for a long time, nothing but the starfield." Furious clicks. "Gods, I hope it doesn't run out."

"No fear," says the deputy. "These things are activated by rapid action in the field. When the action is as slow as a passing starfield, it reverts to its resting rate of about a frame an hour — maybe a frame a day; I forget. Only a passing rock or whatnot will speed them up briefly."

"Here we are," says Coati's voice, "I can see that great string of GO suns. ... Yes, they seem to be heading in to the planet now; I'd need a scope to tell — ah! It's getting bigger. That's it, all right.... Closer, closer ... they're going into orbit. But Syl, look at that frame wobble. I tell you, whoever's flying is not all right. ... Oo-oops — that could be changing pilots, or maybe switching over to the rockets. Oh, dear ... yes, they're coming in like a load of gravel; I'm glad I know they made it. ... Smoke now, nothing but smoke. Their torches have hit. Down — I see flames. This must be action-activated; there'll be a pause now, but we can't tell how long. I know this doesn't mean much to you, Syl, but wait till the smoke clears — ah! Look, there's the landscape we saw around the ship, right?"

The alien voice makes a small murmur.

"Action again — that's the edge of the ramp. Here comes one of the men — now the other — which is which? I'll call the tall, thin one Boney. Oh, dear gods, they're staggering. See, they dropped those gloves. And look, the vegetation around the ship outside the burn is all untrampled. This is their first exit, of course — oh, the Boney one fell down! Could the cold-sleep have done that, have they come out too soon? I don't think so; I think

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they're sick. Look, there's a funny place on Ko's face, over the nose; he keeps scratching. They're not stopping to look around or anything. This isn't good, Syl. ... Now they're both down on their hands and knees, in the burn. Oh, I wish I could help them. Look, do you see the goldy cloud, like your spores, by the ramp?"

A pause, with small "ohs" and murmurs.

"They're up now; I hope they're not burned — why, they're running, or trying to run! Away from the ship. Toward the trampled place we saw, only it isn't trampled now. Oh. Boney is — and Ko — they're *stripping*! What are they trying to do, take a bath? But there's no — Oh! Oh, wait, *what*? Oh, no! Oh! Oh, dear gods, I don't like this much. I thought all spacers operated under the Code. I didn't know recon teams did sex!

"They don't," growls Exec, startling everybody.

General stirrings in the room as Coati's voice goes on haltingly, "Well, this is weird ... I don't much want to look at it; it's not happy-looking like our demo teams back at school. Huh ... I don't think they know what to do, exactly. ... Their faces look crazy; why, one of them has his mouth open like he was yelling or screaming. They look terrible. ... Whoever's listening to this, I'm sorry. I hope I'm not saying anything bad. But this is weird, it's like *ugly*. ... They have to stop soon, I hope. Oh, *no*—" Her voice is shaking, on the verge of some kind of outcry.

"Oh, oh, oh—" But it's the other voice that begins sobbing frankly now. The recorder blurs in a confusion of, "Syl! What's the matter? What's wrong?" and "Oh, I was afraid, oh, I'm afraid, oh, Coati, it's terrible—"

"Yeah, it's ugly. That's not the way Humans really mate, Syl."

"No," says Syl's tones, "I don't mean that. I mean we — oh, oh—" And she's sobbing again.

"Listen, Syl!" Coati gulps back alien tears, cuts her off. "I think you know something you aren't telling me! You tell me what's frightening you this instant, or I'll — I'll bash my own brains so hard it'll shake you loose. See?"

There's the sound of a hard slap on flesh, and then a sudden sharp outcry.

"Hey — what — *you hurt me*, Syl. I th-thought you never—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," the alien voice moans. "I p-panicked when you said you would harm yourself—"

"Or harm *you*, huh? Look, I can stand a lot of pain if I have to. You tell me right now what's got into those men. Look, they've collapsed again. *Tell* me!"

"It — It's the young ones."

"The young what?"

"The young Eea — from s-seeds in th-the ship."

"But you said there were grown-up Eea in each of the men. Didn't

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they keep the seeds off, like you did for me?"

"They — Oh, Coati, I told you, they were very old. They must have died, and the seeds went into the men. I saw them getting feeble. That's when I got frightened and I-left. Before the Humans went in cold-sleep.... Oh, Coati, it's so horrible — I feel so bad—"

"Hush up now, Syl, and let me understand. What could seeds do?"

"Seeds hatch, when they're in — they hatched into young ones. With no mentors, no one to train them, they're like wild animals. They grow. They eat — they eat anything. And then in the cold-sleep, some of them must have matured. No teachers, no one to teach them discipline. Oh, the others should have known the seeds and spores would seek hosts, they should have seen that those visitors who went with them were too old. B-but nobody knew how long, how far. ... When I began to understand how long a time it was going to be, I knew something bad would happen. And I c-couldn't *do* anything; they wouldn't listen to me. So I-I ran away." The alien is convulsing Coati with sobs.

"Well-ll. ..." Long sigh from Coati. "Oh, dear gods, the poor men. You mean the young ones just ate their brains out?"

"Y-yes, I fear so. As if they were Dron. Worse, because no teachers."

"And that sex stuff — that was the mature ones making them do it?"

"Yes! Oh, yes! Like wild animals. We're taught strictly to control it; we're shown. It takes much training to be fully Eea. Even I am not fully trained. ... Oh, I wish I'd died there in space instead of seeing this—"

"Oh, no. Brace up, Syl. It's not your fault. Nobody who isn't used to space could grasp how long the distances are. They probably thought it would be like a long trip in your country.... Oh, look — the men have gotten up. God, they're holding each other up; their legs keep going out of control. Motor centers gone, maybe. They're going — they went up that path north; only it wasn't a path then. They're making the path, trampling.... That's where we go, Syl, unless this shows them coming back. It'll have to be soon; we're almost at where the camera stopped. I wish I knew how long ago this was. The sun looks kind of different, and the colors of the vegetation, but that could be the camera. I'm going to speed up. Syl, stop crying, honey; it's *not your fault.*"

Rapid clicking from the recorder.

"Nothing, nothing," Coati's voice says. "Still nothing. I doubt they came back. Nothing — wait, what's that? Oh, my goodness, it's the wake — it's our ship landing. Well! I don't think I want to see us, do you? Let's take out this cassette and go."

Click.

In the executive office the deputy stops the recorder for a moment.

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"Is that clear to everyone?"

Grunts of assent answer him.

"I think this casts a new light on the potentials of Coati's little friend's race," the medical officer says. "I suggest that we all keep a sharp eye open for anything that looks like grains of yellow powder, in case the young woman's heat treatment did not completely clean out this pipe. Or the preceding one. Her initial precautions were very wise."

Before he's finished speaking, Exec has turned on stronger lights. There is a subdued shuffling as people look themselves over, brushing at imaginary golden spots.

"Gods, if a pipeful of that stuff had got loose in here, and nobody warned!" Zenology mutters. "H'mm ... Boney and Ko."

"Yes," Exec understands Xenology's shorthand. "If we get any indication that their ship lifted off, we have some hard decisions to make. I gather the seeds can affix themselves to the *outside* of space vessels, too. Well, we'd best continue and see what our problem is."

"Right." The deputy douses the top light, restarts the 'corder.

"We are now proceeding north on the trail left by Boney and Ko," says Coati's voice. "We've come about five kiloms. The trail is very plain because the vegetation, or whatever this is, is very delicate and frail. I don't think it's built to have animals walk over it or graze. But the trail isn't all that fresh, because there're little tips of new growth. We haven't seen any animals or birds, only plantlike things and an occasional insect going by fast, like a bullet. It's a pretty cold, quiet, weird place. The ground is almost level, but I think we're headed roughly for one of those lakes we saw from above.

"Syllobene is so shook up by what happened to the men that she won't talk much. I keep trying to tell her it's not her fault. One thing she said shows you — she said the grown-up Eea must have assumed that we could make ourselves immune to the seeds, just as they can, since we're so *complete*. They can't get used to the idea of whole, single animals born that way. And the ship ... we had so many wild, powerful things. It never occurred to them that the men would be as vulnerable as the Dron.... Syl, do you hear what I'm telling my people? Nobody's going to think for a minim that you're at fault. Please brace up, honey, it's awfully lonesome here on this primordial tundra or whatever it is."

"... After you saved my life," murmurs the Syllobene voice sadly.

"Oh-h-h! Listen, hey — Syl, you saved my life, too, for the lords' sake. Don't you realize?"

"I? How?"

"By being on that message pipe, dopus. It was full of seeds, remember? If you hadn't been there, at the risk of your life, if you hadn't been there to

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keep them off me, I'd have gone just like Boney and Ko. They'd have eaten my brains out. *Now* will you cheer up? You've personally saved my life, too. Hey, Syl, how about that? Hello!"

"Hello ... oh, dear Coati Cass—"

"That's my Syl. Listen, I've about had the hiking for today; these boots aren't the greatest. I see a little hummock ahead; maybe it's drier. I'll tramp down a flat place and lay out my bag and screen — I don't want one of those bullet-bugs to hit me. I don't think this sun is going to set, either: it must be summer up here, with a big axial tilt." She chuckles. "I've heard of the lands of the midnight sun! Now I've seen one. This is Coati Cass, en route to I don't know where, signing off."

"Your daughter is a remarkable young woman, Myr Cass," Exec says thoughtfully. Cass grunts. Looking more carefully at him, Exec sees that Cass's eyes are wet.

The record continues with a few words by Coati on awakening. Apparently she — they — have slept undisturbed.

"Green, on we go. Now, Syl, I hope you feel better. Think of me, having to lug a Weeping Willie —that means a sad lump of a person —all over the face of this godlost planet. Hey, don't you know any songs? I'd really like that!"

"Songs?"

"Oh, for the gods' sake. Well, explaining and demonstrating will give me something to do. But I don't think our audience needs it."

Click.

In an instant her voice is back again, sounding tired.

"We've been walking eighteen hours total," she says. "My pedometer says we're sixty-one kiloms from the ships. The trail is still clearly visible. We're nearing an arm of one of the glaciers that extend south from the ice cap. I can see a line of low clouds — yes, with rainbows in them! — like a miniature weather front. The men seem to have been making straight toward it. Syl says the seeds have a primitive tropism to cold. That they can live a very, very long time if it's cold enough. I don't think anybody should come near this planet for a very, *very* long time. All right, onward."

Click — off. Click — on.

"The glacier edge and a snowbank are right ahead. I think I see them — I mean, their bodies.... There's a cold wind from under the glacier; it smells bad."

Click ... click.

"We found them. It's pretty bad." The voice sounds drained. "I did what I could. They're like frozen. They crawled under the edge of the ice; it stands off the ground and makes a cave there, with deep green light-cracks. Nothing had been at them that I could tell, but they both have big, nasty-looking holes above their noses, where the sinuses are.

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"I don't know their last names, so I just scratched 'Boney and Ko, brave Spacers for the Federation, Fed Base 900' on a slaty piece.

"Oh — they left a message, on the same sort of rock. It says: 'Danger. WE are Infekted. Fatel.' All misspelled, like a kid. I guess the ... things ... kept eating their brains out.

"And there are seeds all over around here, like gold dust on the snow. They rise up in a cloud when a shadow falls on them. Syllobene says these are new seeds and spores that the young Eea formed; they mated when the men did, and the seeds grew while the men walked here. Anyway, those holes in their faces are where the new seeds sprouted out in a big clump or stream.

"I got out my glass and looked at a group of seeds. That gold color is their coat or sheath. Syl says it is just about impermeable from outside. There's a big difference in the seeds, too — some are much, much larger and solid-looking; others are more like empty husks. Syl says the big ones beat out the others when competing for a host, and the earliest big one takes all." ... A sigh.

"Let's see, have I said everything? Oh, maybe I should add that I don't think those holes were bad enough to cause the men's deaths. It must have been what went on inside. I didn't see any other wounds, except scratches and bruises from falling down, I think. They ... they were holding each other by the hand. I fixed them up, but I didn't change that.

"Now I guess that's all. I don't want to sleep here; I'm going to get as far back toward the ships as I can tonight. It may not be night; I told you the sun doesn't set, but it makes some pretty reddish glow colors. Syl is so sad she'll hardly talk at all.... Signing off now, unless something drastic happens."

The deputy clicked the 'corder off.

"Is that all?" someone asked.

"Oh, no. I merely wanted to know if everyone is satisfied that they're hearing clearly so far. Did everyone get enough on the men's conditions, or would Doc like me to run back over that?"

"Not at present, thanks," says Medical. "I would assume that the action of forming a large number of embryos requires extra energy, and consequently, during the men's last walk, their parasites were consuming nutrients — brain tissue and blood — at an ever-increasing rate. As to the exact cause of death, it could be a combination of trauma, hypothermia, malnutrition, and loss of blood; or perhaps the parasites attacked brain structures essential to life. We won't know until we can — I guess we won't know, period."

"Anyone else?" says the deputy in his "briefing session" manner.

Coati's father makes an ambigu-

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ous throat-clearing noise but says nothing. No one else speaks, despite the sense of large, unuttered questions growing in the room.

"Oh, get on with it, Fred," Exec says.

"Right."

"We're back at the ship, resting up," says Coati's voice. "Syl, you've been very quiet for a long time. Are you all right? Are you still shook from seeing what the young ones did?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, push it aside, honey. If I can, you can. Try."

"Yes. ..."

"You don't sound like you're trying. Listen, I can't carry a melancholy, dismal person *in my head* all the way back to FedBase. I'll go nutters, even in cold-sleep. Don't you think you could cheer up a little? Wasn't it fun when we tried singing? After all, the men all happened a long time back; it's all over. There's nothing you can do."

In the room at FedBase, Coati's father recognizes a piece of his own advice to his daughter in long-ago days, and blinks back a tear.

"And we've done something useful — actually invaluable, because only you and I are safe on this planet. Right? So maybe we've saved the lives of whoever might have come to look."

"Um'm. ..."

"She's right," says Exec.

"Of course, it's only Human lives, but it was the Human men made you sad, wasn't it, Syl. So really, it's all even. And those two had a really nice time on your planet first. Hey, think how good you'll feel when you get home. Would it make you feel better if I showed you the scenes from Nolian when we get going?"

"Yes ... oh, I don't know."

"Syl, you're hopeless. Or is something else bothering you? I'm getting hunches.... Anyway, we've done evrything we can here, I'm taking *CC-One* up. I collected Boney and Ko's last charting cassettes; I'll put them in a pipe with this, and with the little cassette from the bow camera. I don't think they have left anything else of value. I closed the door and wrote a sign on the port to stay out. If you at the Fed want to salvage that ship, you're going to have to go in with flamers. Or get an Eea to go in with you. Personally I think it isn't worth the danger: some seeds could be on the outside, and get left wherever you went with the ship. Hey, something I've been thinking — I wonder if possibly this could be the plague that wiped out the Lost Colony. Seeds drifting in from space. This whole great group of suns could be dangerous. Oh, lords. What a blow. ... Hey, that's something that Syl and I could check someday! Syl, after you get home and have a nice rest-up, how would you like to come with me on another trip? If they'd let me — I'm sure they would, because we'd be their only seedproof scouts! Only, my

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poor folks. That reminds me: my father may have messaged FarBase; it'd be great if somebody could message him and mother, collect, that all's well and I'm coming back. Thanks a million. My address is Cayman's Port, and all is on record there. Syl, there's another thing we could do — how'd you like to meet my folks? You could learn all about families, and go back and be a big mentor on Nolian. They'd love to meet you, I know ... I guess. Green. I'm taking the ship up now."

Click. Click.

"We're up, and I'm setting in course for the first leg back to FarBase. Whew, these yellow suns are really beautiful. But Syl is still in a funk. It *can't* be because of what we saw on the planet. I keep feeling sure there's something you aren't telling me, Syl. What is it?"

"Oh, no, I—"

"Syl! Listen, you're thinking with *my* brain, and I can *sense* something! Like every time I suggested something we could do, I got drenched in some kind of sadness. And there's a feeling like a big thing tickling when you won't talk. You've got to tell me, Syl. What *is* it?"

"I ... oh, I am so ashamed!"

"See, there *is* something you're hiding! Ashamed of what? Go on, Syl, tell me or I'll — I'll bash us both. *Tell me!*"

"Ashamed," repeats the small voice. "I'm afraid, I'm afraid. My training.... Maybe I'm not so completely developed as I thought. I don't know how to stop — Ohhh," Coati's voice wails, "I wish my mentor were here!"

"Huh?"

"I have this feeling. Oh, dear Coati Cass, it is increasing; I can't suppress it!"

"What?... Don't tell me you're about to have some kind of primitive fit? Did that mating business—?"

"No. Well, maybe, yes. Oh, I *can't*—"

"Syl, you must."

"No. All will be well. I will recollect all my training and recover myself."

"Syl, this sounds terrible. ... But, face it, you're all alone — *we*'re all alone. You can't mate, if that's what's coming over you."

"I know. But—"

"Then that's it. The sooner we get going, the sooner we'll be at FedBase and you can start home. I was going to take a nice nap first, but if you've got troubles, maybe I better just go right into the chest. Couldn't you try to sleep, too? You might wake up feeling better."

"Oh, no! Oh, no! Not the cold! It stimulates us."

"Yes, I forgot. But look, I can't live through all those light-years awake!"

"No — not the cold-sleep!"

"Syl. Myr Syllobene. Maybe you better confess the whole thing *right now*. Just what are you afraid of?"

"But I'm not sure—"

"You're sure enough to be gloom-

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ing for days. Now you tell Coati exactly what you're afraid of. Take a deep breath — here, I'll do it for you — and start. Now!"

"Perhaps I must," the alien voice says, small but newly resolute. "I don't remember if I told you: If the mating cycle overtakes us when an Eea is alone, we can still ... reproduce. By —I know your word — spores. Just like seeds, only they are all identical with the parent. And the Eea grows them and gives birth like seeds, as you saw. Then the Eea comes back to itself." Syl's words are coming in a rush now, as from relief at speaking out. "It's very rare, because of course we are taught to stop it when the feeling begins. I — I never had it before. I'm supposed to seek out my mentor at once, to be instructed how to stop it, or the mentor will visit the young one and make it stop. But my mentor is far away! I keep hoping this is not really the feeling that begins all that, but it won't go away; it's getting stronger. Oh, Coati, my friend, I am so afraid — so fearful —" The voice trails off in great sobs.

The Coati voice says, slowly, "Oh, whew. You mean, you're afraid you're going to be grabbed by this mating thing and make spores in my head? And they'll bore a hole?"

"Y-yes." The alien is in obvious misery.

"Wait a minute. Will it make you go crazy and stop being you, like a Human who gets intoxicated? Oh, you couldn't know about that. But you'll act like those untrained young ones? I mean, what will you do?"

"I may — eat blindly. Oh-h-h ... don't leave me alone in your cold-sleep!"

"Well. Well. I have to think."

Click — the deputy has halted the machine.

"I thought we should take a minim to appreciate this young woman's dilemma, and the dilemma of the alien."

The xenobiologist sighs. "This urge, or cycle is evidently not so very rare, since instructions are given to the young to combat it. Instructions that unfortunately depend on the mentor being available. But it doesn't appear to be a normal part or stage of maturing — more like an accidental episode. I suggest that here it was precipitated by the experience with the two Humans infected by untrained young. That awakened what the Eea seem to regard as part of their primitive system."

"How fast can they get back to that Eea planet, ah, Nolian?" someone asks.

"Not fast enough, I gather," Exec says. "Even if she took the heroic measure of traveling without cold-sleep."

"She's got to get rid of that thing!" Coati's father bursts out. "Cut into her own head and pull it out if she has to! Can't somebody get to her and operate?"

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He is met by the silence of negation. The moments they are hearing passed, for good or ill, long back.

"The alien said it could leave," the deputy observes. "We will see if that solution occurs to them." He clicks on.

As if echoing him, Coati's voice comes in. "I asked Syl if she could pull out and park somewhere comfortable until the fit passed. But she says — tell them, Syl."

"I have been trying to withdraw for some time. Early on, I could have done so easily. But now the strands of my physical being have been penetrating so very deeply into Coati's brain, into the molecular and — is atomic the word? — atomic structure. So I have attempted to cut loose from portions of myself, but whenever I succeed in freeing one part, I find that the part I freed before has rejoined. I-I have not had much instruction in this technique, not since I was much smaller. I seem to have grown greatly while with Coati. Nothing I try works. Oh, oh, if only another Eea were here to help! I would do anything, I'd cut myself in half—"

"It's a god-cursed cancer," Coati's father growls. He perceives no empathetic young alien, but only the threat to his child.

"But dear Coati Cass, I cannot. And there is no mistake now; the primitive part of myself that contains this dreadful urge is growing, growing, although I am fighting it as well as I can. I fear it will soon overwhelm me. Is there not something you can do?"

"Not for you, Syl. How could I? But tell me — after it's all passed, and you've, well, eaten my brains out, will you come back to yourself and be all right?"

"Oh — I could never be all right, knowing I had murdered you! Killed my friend! My life would be a horrible thing. Even if my people accepted me, I could not. I mean this, Coati Cass."

"H'mm. Well. Let me think." The recorder clicks off — on. Coati's voice comes back. "Well, the position is: If we carry out our plan to go back to FedBase, I'll be a zombie, or dead, when I get there, and you'll be miserable. And the ship'll be full of spores. I wouldn't be able to land it, but somebody'd probably manage to intercept us. And the people who opened it would get infected with your spores, and by the time things got cleared up, a lot of Humans would have died, and maybe nobody would feel like taking you back to your planet. Ugh."

The alien voice echoes her.

"On the other hand, if we cut straight for Nolian, even at the best, you'd have made spores and they'd have chewed up my brains and it'd be impossible for me to bring the ship down and let you out. So you'd be locked up with a dead Human and a lot of spores, flying on to gods know

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where, forever. Unless somebody intercepted us, in which case the other scenario would take over.... Syl, I don't see any out. What I do see is that this ship will soon be a flying time bomb, just waiting for some non-Eea life to get near it."

"Yes. That is well put, Coati-my-friend." the small voice says sadly. "Oh!"

"What?"

"I felt a strong urge to — to hurt you. I barely stopped it. Oh, Coati! Help! I don't want to become a wild beast!"

"Syl, honey ... it's not your fault. I wonder, shouldn't we sort of say our good-byes while we can?"

"I see ... I see."

"Syllobene, my dear, whatever happens, remember we were great friends, and had adventures together, and saved each other's lives. And if you do something bad to me, remember I know it isn't really you; it's just an accident because we're so different. I ... I've never had a friend I loved more, Syl. So good-bye, and remember it all with joy if you can."

A sound of sobbing. "G-goo-bye, dear Coati Cass. I am so sad with all my being that it is through me that badness has come. Being friends with you has lifted my life to lightness I never dreamed of. If I survive, I will tell my people how good and true Humans are. But I don't think I will have that chance. One way or another, I will end my life with yours, Coati Cass. Above all, I do not wish to bring more trouble on Humans."

"Syl. ..." Coati says thoughtfully. "If you mean that about going together, there's a way. Do you mean it?"

"Y-yes. Yes."

"The thing is, in addition to what happens to us, our ship will be a menace to anybody, Human or whatever, who gets at it. It's sort of our duty not to do a thing like that, you know? And I really don't want to go on as a zombie. And I see that beautiful yellow sun out there, the sun we saw all those days and nights down on the planet ... like it's waiting for us ... Syl?"

"Coati, I understand you."

"Of course, there're a lot of things I wanted to do; you d-did, too — maybe this is the b-big one—"

The recorder lapses to a fuzzy sound.

"Something has been erased," the deputy says.

It comes back in a minim or two with Coati's voice saying, "—didn't need to hear all that. The point is, we've decided. So—ow! Oh-h-h—*ow!* What?"

"Coati!" The small voice seems to be screaming. "Coati, I'm losing — I'm losing myself! Something wants to hurt you, to stop you — to make you go into cold-sleep — I'm fighting it — Oh, forgive me, forgive me—"

"OW! Hey, I forgive you, but — Oh, *ouch!* Wait, hold it, baby, I just

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have to set our course, and then I'll hop right into the chest. I *have* to set the computer; try to understand."

Undecipherable noise from the alien. Then, to everyone's surprise, the unmistakable sound of a young Human voice humming fills the room.

"I know that tune," the computer chief says suddenly. "It's old — wait — yes. It's 'Into the Heart of the Sun.' ... She's trying to tell us what she's doing without alerting that maniacal parasite."

"We'd better listen closely," the deputy observes superfluously.

A moment later the humming gives place to a softly sung bar of words —yes, it's 'Into the Heart of the Sun.' It ends in a sharp yelp. "Hey, Syl, try not to, *please*—"

"I try! I try!"

"We get into cold-sleep just as soon as I possibly can. Don't hurt me, you doppelgänger, or I'll make a mistake and you'll end up as fried spores — Owwwww! For an amateur, you're a little d-devil, Syl." The voice seems to be trying to conceal the wail of real agony. Exec is reminded of the wounded patrolmen he tended as a young med-aid long ago during the Last War.

"I just have to regoogolate the fribilizer that keeps us from penetrating high g-fields," says Coati. "You wouldn't want *that* to happen, would you?"

Her own throat growls at her. "Hurry."

"That's an old nonsense phrase," Computers speaks up. "'Googolating the fribilizer' — she's trying to tell us she's killing the automatic-drive override. Oh, good girl."

"And now I *must* send this message pipe off. It's in your interests, Syl; it shows you doing all those useful things. And I have to heat it first — Oh, ow — please let me, Syl, please try to let m-me—"

Sounds that might be a heat oven, roughly handled, puncuated by yelps from Coati. Her father is gripping his chair arms so hard they creak.

"Yes, I know that big yellow sun is getting pretty hot and bright. Don't let it worry you. If we go close by it, we'll save a whole leg of our trip. It's the only neat thing to do. Han Lu Han, anybody there? Here, I'll pull the bow blinds.

"And now the cassettes from Boney and Ko go in the pipe — *ow!* — and where's that little one from their bow camera? Syl, try to tell your primitive self you're just slowing me down with these jabs. Please, please — Ah, here it is. And out come the spores — I mean, the seeds that were in there.... That pipe is *hot!*

"And now it's time to say goodbye, put this in the pipe, and climb into the chest. I really hope the pipe's frequency can pull it through these g's. On second thought, maybe I'd like to see where we're going while it lasts. As long as I can stand the pain, I think I'll stay out and watch."

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Loud sounds of the cassette being handled.

"Good-bye, all. To my folks, oh, I do love you, Dad and Mum. Maybe somebody at FedBase can explain — *OW!!* Oh ... Oh ... I can't ... Hey, Syl, is there anybody you want to say good-bye to? Your mentor?"

A confused vocalization, then, faintly: "Yes. ..."

"Remember Syl. She's the real stuff, she's doing this for Humans. For an alien race. She could have stopped me, believe it. ... Bye, all."

A crash, and the recorder goes to silence.

"Han Lu Han," says the xenobiologist quietly into the silence. "He was that boy in the Lyrae mission. 'It's the only really neat thing to do.' He said that before he took the rescue run that killed him."

Exec clears his throat. "Myr Cass, we will send a reconnaissance mission to check the area. But I fear there is no reason to believe, or hope, that Myr Coati failed in her plan to eliminate the contagious menace of herself, her passenger, and the ship by flying into a sun. By the end of the message, she was close enough to feel its heat, and it was doubtless the effect of the gravity that delayed this message pipe so much longer than the preceding one, which was sent only a few days earlier. She had, moreover, carefully undone the precautions that prevent a ship on automatic drive from colliding with a star. Myr Cass, when confronted by a terrifying and painful dilemma capable of causing great harm to others, your daughter took the brave and honorable course, and we must be grateful to her."

Silence, as all contemplate the sudden ending of a bright young life. Two bright young lives.

"But you said she was alive and well when the message was sent." Coati's father makes a last, confused protest.

"Sir, I said she was compos mentis and probably in her ship," the deputy reminds him.

"Thank the gods her mother didn't come here. ..."

"You can pinpoint the star she was headed for?" Exec asks Charts.

"Oh, yes. The B-K coordinates are good."

"Then, if nobody has a different idea, I suggest that it be appropriately named in the new ephemeris."

"Coati's Star," says Commo. People are rising to leave.

"And Syllobene," a quiet voice says. "Have we forgotten already?"

"Myr Cass, I think you may perhaps prefer to be alone for a moment," Exec tells him. "Anytime you wish to see me, I'll be at your service in my office."

"Thank you."

Exec leads his deputy out, and opts for a quiet lunch in their small private dining room. Added to the list of things that were on his mind be-

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fore he entered the conference chamber to hear Coati's message are now the problem of when and how to contact the Eea; how to determine the degree of danger from their seeds or spores, in space near the promising GO suns; the Lost Colony question; whether to quarantine the area; and whether there is any chance of any seeds in FedBase itself from the earlier messages. Also, a sample of the chemical that Syllobene had immunized Coati with would seem to be a rather high priority.

But behind all these practical thoughts, an image floats in his mind's eye, accompanied by the sound of a light young voice humming. It's the image in silhouette of two children — one Human, the other not — advancing steadfastly, hand in hand, toward an inferno of alien solar fire.

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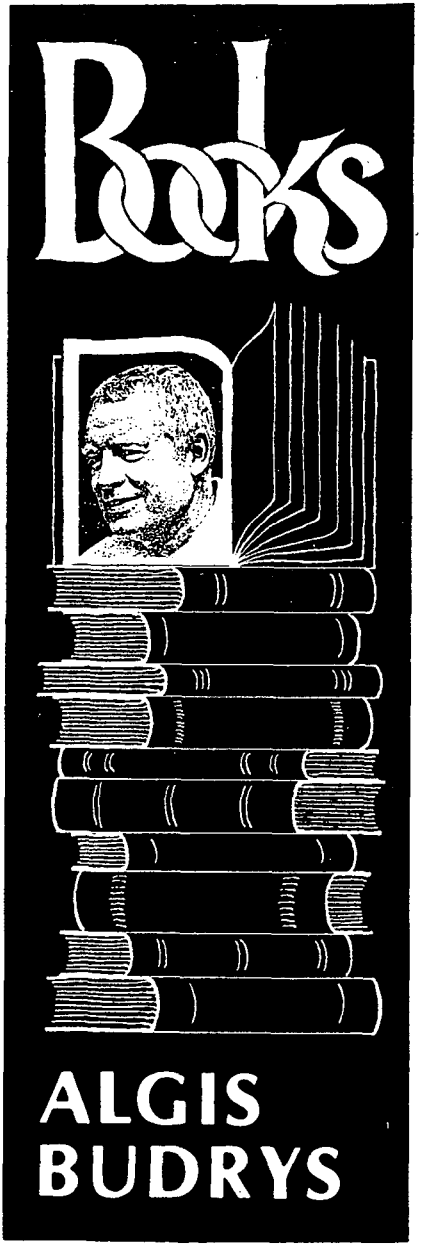

The Glamour, Christopher Priest, Doubleday, $15.95

Barnaby #1, Crockett Johnson, Del Rey, $2.95

Noted:

The Dunwich Horror and Others by H.P. Lovecraft, S.T. Joshi, Ed., Arkham, $15.95

The Sand Pebbles, Richard McKenna, Naval Institute Press, $16.95

Astounding/Analog on microfiche, Micro Information Concepts. Expensive.

England's Christopher Priest is one of SF's more interesting writers. Of all his books I've read, only *The Space Machine* — a pastiche unifying *The War of The Worlds* and *The Time Machine* — strikes me as a wholly successful piece of work, but as you might deduce, he never fails to intrigue.

Born in 1943, he's a shade too young to have been part of the New Wave when it was first breaking over there in the early 1960s. But like quite a few of his contemporaries, M. John Harrison and Thomas M. Disch prominent among them, he clearly has little desire to owe anything to John W. Campbell, Jr. His career displays quite a debt to J. G. Ballard and one avatar of Brian Aldiss, and rather less obligation to Kingsley Amis and Michael Moorcock.

Underlying all of Priest's work I've seen is a quality common to all notable U.K. writers ... a sense of deliberate self-restriction to themes and

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styles not common in contemporary American SF, as if attempting to be the new Heinlein or Herbert, or even the new Arthur C. Clarke, would be letting down the side. The best British SF is ... well ... insular, and among these people who are steadfastly not aiming for the *New York Times* best-seller list, Priest is one of the best, with all the sorts of strength and weakness one might thus expect.

His newest U.S. book, *The Glamour*, makes a fascinating sampler. You ought to try it; I think your reaction to it would represent an honest test-out of your potential reaction to an entire school of SF. If you like *The Glamour*, you will probably like almost everything by Ballard (even though his landscapes are quite different), and you should run, not walk, to Aldiss's *Cryptozooic*; you will respond well, I think, to Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius conceit although you might not like some Cornelius stories (they being perhaps a tad too comical, in the Amis sense), and, for a wild hare, try D.G. Compton's *The Silent Multitude*.

There is, in fact, a striking lot of Compton in *The Glamour*; it has that scent of opera soap to remind us that when Compton even slightly overdraws one of his female leads she begins at once to chew the scenery. Priest, having written quite often in the past about lovers tormented when things don't go altogether right, has not, I think, strung the bow quite this tightly before.

Priest's habitual style in characters does not take well to this sort of tension. It seems a point of honor with him to never press endearing qualities on anyone; his people calculate matters, even matters of the heart. If anything else in the work then falters or confuses, the reader probably tends to say "Hell with it; I never liked these people that much anyway," and to drop the puzzle rather than delve into it.

But let me tell you about this particular story:

The premise as set forth is that there are invisible people who live among us, shoplifting their existences. They are not naked and perfectly transparent, in the Wellsian sense; they are possessed of a "glamour" that makes them unnoticed.*

Most of these people are, according to Priest, uninteresting even within their own frame of reference. They are people who began as the drab sibling in a family with a winsome one; the schoolchildren who never put themselves forward either as leaders or as butts ... somewhere in late adolescence they realize their increasing inability to communicate or attract at-

**Oddly enough, this is an idea first articulated to my knowledge by John Campbell, and expressed in such 1950s* Astounding *stories as "Watch Your Step" and "Nobody Bothers Gus," as well as a* Venture *story called "And Then She Found Him," which is about a female shoplifter. All three, plus some others in this canon, are by Algis Budrys.*

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tention in any way results from an increasingly oppressive psychic "cloud" that has formed around them. Most soon cannot make themselves "visible" at all; they drift through life with bad teeth, sleeping in other people's beds, eating free in restaurant kitchens, dying young for lack of medical attention to illnesses. Most of them are creeps, and thus Priest dismisses them.

The viewpoint characters in *The Glamour* are apparently atypical. The girl, Susan, can shift back and forth between the two worlds by an effort of will. When she is with Niall, in effect her demon lover, she is sometimes nearly helpless to follow her ostensibly preferred lifestyle, which is to remain visible, pay for her drinks in pubs, and pursue a career as a freelance illustrator. When she is with Richard Grey, the Orpheus to whom she plays Euridyce, she eventually reaches a state in which her glamour has apparently dissipated entirely and permanently.

But this situation is not clearcut. For one thing, Grey is himself glamourous. Although he's at first unaware of this trait, it's the one that Susan immediately detected in him, while invisibly in a pub with Niall; it's what attracted her to Grey, and motivated her to approach and seduce him, and to attempt to abandon Niall. Their subsequent affair is complicated by three factors:

One, Niall, a dedicatedly invisible scrounger, makes himself invisible to Susan as well as Grey, and participates in their nuptials.

Two, Grey is severely injured in a coincidental car-bomb blast, losing his memory.

Three, even if he had it, there's the problem that in an alternate version of reality he met Susan in the south of France, not in London; Niall was in St. Tropez at the time he was supposedly in bed with Susan and Grey in Hampshire, and eventually Grey sends Susan the postcard she received from Niall.

Ah, yes, well, toward the end, here, Priest stops writing about this sort of glamour entirely, and drifts into metaphors on the author/character relationship. He begins writing about writing, and draws to a close in a metaphysical cloud not of invisibility but of smoke. The effect is to distance the reader even farther from the characters as people; to force the reader's attention to the fact that reading is going on.

I don't think that's very good to do to an audience that volunteered only to be told a story, not to ponder the author's ratiocinations on writing. So I see this book ultimately as a failure, though an interesting one. But it is most clearly a failure only in terms of what the average reader would expect from a Doubleday novel (which, by the way, contains more explicit sexual detail than one recalls ever seeing in a Doubleday book be-

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fore). I think it's also a failure on deeper levels — Priest fully closes neither with his ostensible premise nor with what he ultimately tries to convince us is his real one. But I think the readership of this magazine, and certainly of this column, contains a fair proportion of persons who have volunteered for more than the level of entertainment normally served by, for instance, Doubleday genre books. And so, caveat lector, I believe that *The Glamour* in your case would repay your attention.

By the way, Priest uses "glamour," spelled "glamour," in its correct, ancient sense. That does not excuse those Americans who, in speaking of the Hollywood variety, also spell it "glamour." The correct U.S. spelling has for several generations been "glamor," as with "color." Because the U.S. educational system has now made several generations of people foggily unsure of much of anything having to do with precise language, and the far-reaching consequences of not being sure of how to say what you think you might mean if you could only recall how to think precisely, "glamour" has now re-established itself, thanks, I believe, to the publication of a fashion magazine with the name. And yesterday I saw a U.S. publication with a reference to "colour," a spelling occasioned, I'm sure, by someone licking the tip of a pencil and muttering 'Well, it rhymes with glamour.'

My primary objection is not an Anglophobic one; it's to the extra expenditure. On a television broadcast I watched while reading Priest's book, a trainer with a styptic pencil was "*ad*ministering" to a fighter, and in a saloon to which I fled near midnight, the bartender referred to "the *be*witching hour," which was of course on Daylight Savings Time. All other considerations aside, do you realize how much all these superfluous keystrokes, accumulating over the length and breadth of this land, cost in dollars and cents?

Hell with it. A cure for many a melancholy — a good, a lasting cure — is Barnaby. Actually, are Barnaby, and his fairy godfather O'Malley.

You may not remember. It was not only before Doonesbury and B.C., it was before Pogo. It was, in fact, contemporaneous with the concoction of Dondi, may that *verkakter* little waif's eyes go blank. But Crockett Johnson's daily strip nevertheless made cushlamochree a household word in the 1940s, and left fandom imprinted with permanent references to the Elves, Leprechauns, Gnomes and Little Men's Chowder and Marching Society.

Barnaby's successors may be seen in him; the practical-minded, wary little boy in his Doctor Dentons regards O'Malley's antics with a bemused stare that was next everted by Pogo vis-a-vis Albert the Alligator. But there

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is a particular fey quality — a glamour — in the relationship between the little boy and the clumsy pixie (who looked exactly like a miniature Tammany Hall ward-heeler with pink wings, a green coat and a long cigar for a magic wand). It lacks all trace of violence seen as love, but it nevertheless reminds me of Krazy Kat and Offisa Pup, along with the brick-hurling Ignatz Mouse, the only mentionable predecessors to Johnson's sweet, wonderful invention.

It ran long enough to be enshrinable in several books, and so Ballantine's current release, Barnaby #1, *Wanted: A Fairy Godfather*, will be followed by *Mister O'Malley and the Haunted House* (which will contain the sequences with Gus the Ghost), by *Jackeen J. O'Malley for Congress*, and, finally, *Mister O'Malley Goes For the Gold*. That will be all. It will not be enough, but it will be the most that Johnson could give us.

I don't know how I feel about H.P. Lovecraft. I used to think he was just an over-wrought compulsive who had luckily found an audience before the guys with the long-handled nets quite got to him. Even as a teen-ager, I found his monsters and menaces more risible than horripilating, and his writing style unfortunately imitable by far too many persons.

Then I came to admire the craftsmanship that underlay his superficial excesses. And as I became aware of how charming his many disciples had found him, and how willing he had been to give of his time and energy, my opinion again expanded. The first review I ever did for this magazine was of L. Sprague DeCamp's *Lovecraft: A Biography*, and though I think Doubleday could have edited it more carefully, I would still proffer that as one of the best, roundest accounts of any writer's whole personality, from which Lovecraft emerged almost palpably.

This does not now prevent me from holding the opinion that much of Lovecraft's craftsmanship was wrong-headed; that he played to rules, rather than to readers, to cabalistic symmetries rather than sensibility.

If, however, you would like to see for yourself, Arkham House (Post Office Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583) is engaged in a three-volume work of restoring his short fiction. Resulting from a massive research project by Brown University Professor S.T. Joshi, these texts purport to be definitive, with all the pulp magazine editing and typographical errors taken out and Lovecraft thus standing for good or ill in exactly the postures of his own choosing.

The first of these books, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, is now available, and at 433 text pages, plus an introduction by Lovecraft's pupil, Robert Bloch, is a great bargain at $15.95. For some, it is of course also entirely indispensible.

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Some will remember Richard McKenna's mid-century appearance on the SF horizon. He began his career, as a matter of fact, in this magazine's September, 1958 issue, with "Casey Agonistes." I remember how excited editor Robert P. Mills was ... and I remember how pleased all of us in the community were to get to know Mac, and how unenviously we enjoyed his continuing success. He had been a U.S. Navy lifer, a farm boy serving engines in the Asiatic Fleet for many years, his discharge delayed by World War II. He had been working in notebooks for years during all that time, and after the war he went to the University of North Carolina, where he studied writing with all its sleeve valves and low-pressure pistons until he could make it hum seemingly just by running a ruminative hand over the boiler casing.

Many an SF magazine, and Damon Knight's *Orbit* series of original anthologies, carried his work, and glad of it. Then he began to sell Navy stories to *The Saturday Evening Post*, and so forth, and not too long before he died in his sleep one night, he wrote *The Sand Pebbles*, which won a prize and was made into a film with Steve McQueen and a cast of thousands.

It is an interesting film that still turns up on television, full of spectacle. It is also a profoundly mistaken film, beginning with the line "Hello, engine," whereas the book begins with "Hello, ship." Mac knew that elegance of motive power, while much to be sought after, was ultimately intended to be of service, not a thing in itself.

The book has now been republished, in an excellently made edition using permanent materials, by The Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD 21402, as part of its Classics of Naval Literature series. The price is $16.95, and it can be ordered separately, without subscribing to the series — which, by the way, is full of truly classic fiction and nonfiction about seafaring.

There's not a word of SF in *The Sand Pebbles*, although, with its panoramic views of China in the days of gunboat diplomacy, and its loving detailed studies of the men of engines and the people of a timeless heritage, it touches on many of the sorts of things that bring us to SF. But in any case, one of our best wrote this marvelous work; there is not one synthetic aspect to it, and if you are here because you read, then read this.

A complete set of *Astounding Science Fiction* — let of alone of *ASF* plus many years of its mutated form, *Analog* — is (A) for all practical purposes, priceless, and (B) by now too brittle to open up and read. Yet you cannot accurately understand science fiction, let along enjoy some of its most enduring works, without seeing

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them in context as they appeared in the publication that took what Hugo Gernsback had invented and transmuted it, via John W. Campbell's personality imposed on his predecessors' and on his writers, into the foundation for SF's present edifice.

Microfilm *ASFs* have been available for years. Now microfiches are available from Micro Information Concepts, P.O. Box 2163, Dallas, TX 75221. Their 'phone number is 214/824-3969, and if you're interested I suggest calling to ascertain details I might not cover.

The fiches are about 4" by 6", at a 24X reduction, and each contains one complete issue, photographed from an actual copy. There are also color fiches of all the covers in the series, which as of June, 1985, is supposed to go up to December, 1984, starting January, 1930. That alone is $125. For $20, you can have a "complete" index. (It's the Mike Ashley *Index*, which cuts off with December, 1979, and sells in hard copy for $32.45).

So if you have a viewer, you're ahead. In any event, MIC claims considerable more clarity than microfilm offers, and, of course, ease of handling and retrieval. They make a pretty convincing case; everyone who micro-stores graphic data has gone from roll film to fiche, and there must be a reason.

They offer a $30 monocular optical viewer, which would probably be of very limited use. More realistically, they have a $140.00 electrical reader/projector that can be read from its ground glass screen or used in conjunction with a wall screen.

You can see what sort of arithmetic we're talking. Here's the nub: Five decades' worth of fiches cost $140 per decade, and the January 1980-December 1984 set is $80. Any given year is $16.00. There's no mention of making individual issues available. To go for this, you have to be a librarian or a very serious private researcher.

But if you're one of those, the chances are you have to have it, and the chances are it will serve you well.

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Ron Goulart's last story here ("Me and the Devil," April 1984) recently sold to the new TV series TALES FROM THE DARK SIDE. His latest story concerns a biographer who is set upon immortalizing his subject — until his subject objects with ghostly vehemence.

That Wonderful Summer

BY
RON GOULART

It seemed a very traditional haunting.

Midnight was always the hour when the ghostly manifestations commenced. There was always chain rattling, hollow moaning, spectral laughter.

On this particular Monday evening, the Berkeley hills were being visited by a storm. Lightning crackled, thunder rumbled, and heavy rain hit hard at the hillside Victorian mansion. Slippery wind whispered down the many lopsided chimneys, tugged at the many wooden shutters and made them creak and whine.

At about six minutes beyond midnight, a sheeted specter appeared beside the big four-poster bed in the shadowy master bedroom. Pointing an invisible hand, it advised in a deep, quavery voice, "Begone."

"O.K., O.K., that's it." Lovely Heather Redfield put aside the serious paperback novel she'd been trying to read, burying it in a sprawl of mysteries on the beside table. "I'm walking. Not one more night do I spend in this dopey house."

As the blonde young woman swung out of bed, the sheet gave an ominous chuckle and then fluttered, empty, to the thick carpet.

Thunder and wind rattled the windows all around.

Heather was clad in a short, lacy nightgown, and gooseflesh was forming on her bare arms.

Very cautiously she approached the crumpled pink bedsheet. After watching it for few seconds, she poked at it gingerly with her big toe.

The sheet suddenly rose up, took form, and lunged at the young woman.

Yelling, "Holy O'Malley!" Heather dived back into bed.

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Chuckling a few more times, the sheeted ghost drifted across the room. After opening the door with unseen fingers, it left the big bedroom.

Heather folded her arms under her breasts. Her nostrils were flaring, her eyes narrowed. "Out," she said very slowly and distinctly. "I want out."

The pudgy man beside her sat up, rubbing at his eyes. "Hum?"

Heather gave him an elbow in the ribs. "Don't try to flimflam me, Rex. You weren't asleep."

"I was, Heather. Honestly." Rex Golumb yawned. "You, I take it, experienced another hallucin—"

"Dummy!" She elbowed him again. "Ever since you talked me into this dopey idea, ever since I was dumb enough to move into Sylvie Dahlman's old homestead and started sleeping in her dumb bed three long days ago, I have—"

"Three days isn't one hell of a long time, Heather."

"Long enough to've been haunted eighty-seven which ways," she said. "Spooky voices making snide remarks about not only my looks but my acting ability, weird laughs from—"

"What's a ghost know about acting? Anybody who saw you when you were a regular on 'Terminal Ward' last year knows you—"

"I thought you said there weren't any ghosts."

Golumb shrugged. "O.K., I'm humoring you." He dodged the latest thrust of her elbow by rolling out of bed.

"And if all that dopey stuff hasn't been enough, tonight a spook in a dippy pink sheet practically hops in bed with me." The blonde actress pointed an accusing finger. "And you, my so-called agent and my alleged lover, you tell me I didn't see a darn thing."

Golumb tugged on the top of his candy-stripe pajamas. "I do love you, Heather. And I'm the best agent in the whole Shurefine Talent Associates offices down in L.A. There's—"

"So how come you let me be haunted? What kind of agent sets his clients up to be persecuted by a bunch of dopey—"

"Listen, 'That Wonderful Summer' is your big break," the agent informed her. "A four-part miniseries, running in prime time on a major network. And you are the star, the absolute star of the whole tortilla. You play Sylvie Dahlman herself, that tragic and brilliant authoress who blazed for a few short years and then took her life while still vibrant with youth and beaut—"

"There's another thing." Heather snatched up the fat paperback she'd been trying to read. "*The Doorknob*. What kind of title is that for a novel?"

"*The Doorknob* happens to be a classic of American literature. In the twenty years since it was first published, it's sold 7 million copies."

"I know, Rex, it says all that right here on the cover." She dropped the book to the table. "But I've been try-

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ing for a month, ever since I was signed for this dippy miniseries, to read my way through the dumb thing. I can't get beyond page seventeen."

"It's not essential you—"

"I want to understand my character."

"That's admirable, but you don't have to bust a —"

"How can you truly understand a person when you can't even get any further than page seventeen of his or her masterpiece without dozing off or slumping into a profound stupor? When I was on 'Terminal Ward,' I understood my—"

"A nymphomaniac with a drinking problem is easier to get with than—"

"Well, we're straying from the point." Heather climbed free of the four-poster. "I intend to vacate the premi—"

"The publicity is still building on this, Heather. *'Gifted Actress Lives in House of Character She's Playing!'*" He started framing headlines in the air. "'*Heather Redfield Soaks Up Atmosphere in Long-Deserted Dahlman House!*'"

"'*Heather Redfield Gets Billy Bejesus Scared Out of Her!*'" She went striding toward a closet.

The rain continued to hit at the windows.

"Everybody at Multistar Productions, even old Marcus, likes the idea of your living here in Sylvie's old digs while we're up in Berkeley doing the location stuff for 'That Wonderful Summer,'" reminded her agent. "And as for understanding her character — this very damn house is where the poor kid spent most of the twenty-six years of her pathetic life. This is where she penned such gems of twentieth-century fiction as *The Doorknob, The Breadbox, The Windowshade and Other Stories,* plus—"

"I couldn't even get through the introduction on that last one." Bending gracefully from the waist, the blonde actress tugged a large tan suitcase from the closet. "I conked out on page iv."

"Sylvie Dahlman didn't write the intro. That was Alex Mavity, same guy who did the first draft of our script and knew and loved poor Sylvie during—"

"He's somewhat dippy, too. Writes a dopey script, then gets himself hired as technical adviser." She carried the suitcase to the bed, tossed it atop the tangled spread. "So he comes up here from USC or wherever to—"

"UCLA."

"His idea of technical advice is to tell me that Sylvie didn't wear eyeliner."

"You've been bitching about knowing her character. So Mavity can give you little tips like that about—"

"If I don't wear eye makeup, I photograph like Little Orphan Annie," she said as she yanked open the suitcase. "You, in your agent capacity, ought to know that. *'Heather Redfield Appears on the Tube Without Eyeballs!*'"

Golumb shrugged again. "Mavity's

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only being helpful — or trying to be," he said, glancing at the window as lightning sizzled on the wooded grounds outside. "After all, he had the unfortunate romance with poor Sylvie that's the core of our miniseries. And he's the one who found her tragic body dangling from the beams down in the—"

"Enough, Rex. I'm full up to here with morbid details." she crossed to the closet. "Lew Moonstone or somebody's going to have to get me a suite at a nice hotel. Tonight. One that's got a swimming pool and not one single darn spook."

Rubbing at his chin, the agent said, "You know, Heather, we might be able to exploit this ghost angle. *'Ghosts of Past Haunt Rising Star!'*"

"I've already been written up in *The National Intruder*," she reminded him. "When you made up that dippy yarn about my taking a ride in a UFO."

"You were just starting out, that was two long years back."

"So the 10 million dimwits who read that thing think I shacked up with some little green weirdo from Mars." She bent once more and reached for a pair of her shoes.

A spectral foot kicked her in the backside, sending her tumbling into the dust and shadows.

Tricia Mavity caught Max Kearny's arm, her grip tight. "I really like your house here in Marin County. C'mon, show me the patio." She tugged him across his wide living room in the direction of the sliding glass doors.

"It's raining," Max mentioned. He was a middle-sized man in his middle forties, dark hair short-cropped and graying at the edges.

"Even so." She glanced over her shoulder to where her lean, lanky husband was sitting on the low white sofa chatting with Max's wife. "Alex, Max and I are stepping out for a bit of fresh air."

Alex Mavity took off his glasses and frowned. "Don't you think it's a tad overcast for—"

"I want to breathe as much smog-free air as I can while we're up here." The slim brunette slid the door open and pulled Max out onto the slick flagstones.

"If we hunch here under the roof overhang," he said as she shut the door, "you can talk about whatever it is that's bothering you, Tricia."

She took a slow, deep breath. "You're still as perceptive as you were when I worked as a copywriter at Kearny & Associates seven years back."

"Pretty obvious that you're uneasy." He watched the rain hit at the twilight patio.

"What do you think of Alex?"

"Whoa now, I don't give domestic advice."

"No, I mean . . . does he look . . . at ease?"

"He looks jumpy. Nearly as much as you do."

"I don't know how much you know

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about Alex and Sylvie Dahlman."

Max grinned. "Difficult not to know about them," he replies. "Most everybody's read his *The Genuis I Loved: Sylvie Dahlman, Sylvie Dahlman — Her Bright and Tragic Life, A Guide to Sylvie Dahlman,* and now *That Wonder-Summer.* Plus his introductions to the collected works of Sylvie Dahlman."

"You left out *The Sylvie Dahlman Scrapbook,* and the yearly Sylvie Dahlman calendars."

"Those, too."

Tricia said, "Alex has, since long before I ever met him, made a sort of cottage industry out of that woman."

"She wasn't a bad writer."

"Hooey, Max. She was god-awful," said Alex Mavity's wife. "I write too, you know, and I can spot turgid prose and pompous—"

"You and Alex disuss her merits much?"

"Nope, he'd consider my real opinions of that woman blasphemous," she answered. "I try, Max, I really and honestly do, not to be jealous of that woman."

"Not exactly easy."

"But I do want this miniseries to go well. If it's a hit, the sales of all the books will shoot up," Tricia said.

"Were I you, I don't think I'd be anxious to see his romance with some other lady brought to the screen," Max said. "Wouldn't you rather see them dramatize your romance with Alex?"

"Oh, but I'm not a great writer, just a successful author of fat romance novels," Tricia said. "And I'm not dead. Dying young is a great publicity gimmick. Especially if you leave somebody like Alex behind to tend your shrine. The sales on her god-awful novels were never much until after his *The Genius I Loved* came out."

"His sales are pretty good, too."

"They sure as heck are. And this TV thing'll boost them further. Making us lots of money."

"Good. Now what's the—"

"You still — I know because I read about your activities now and then in the newspaper — have your sideline. What I mean is—"

"This is some sort of occult problem you—"

"You're going to get a chill out there, Trish." Mavity had opened the glass door, was frowning out at them. "Best come back in here."

"In a minute, Alex."

"Now, I think."

She hesitated, then went back into the living room. "I'm going to tell him, Alex."

Mavity stopped in front of the deep fireplace. "I thought perhaps that's what you were doing out there in the drizzle."

"I was working up to it."

"Trish, being the imaginative one in the family," her husband explained to Max, "tends to exagger—"

"A ghost is a ghost," said Tricia. She walked over and sat next to the auburn-haired Jillian. "And I know whose ghost it is that's haunting the

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Dahlman mansion over in Berkeley."

"It's only some stunt cooked up by the apeman and—"

"No, Rex Golumb can't be doing all those things that are disrupting—".

"Once the man claimed Heather slept with the crew of a flying saucer." From the pocket of his tweed jacket, he took a pipe. "This latest—"

"Since Max and I aren't exactly sure what you're both so unsettled about," put in Jillian, "maybe, Tricia, you better fill us in."

"The miniseries is haunted," said Tricia.

"Nonsense," said Alex.

It was still raining on Friday.

A light, blurry rain that fell straight down on the trucks, vans, and equipment gathered on the slanting lawn in front of the three-story Dahlman house.

Max, taking the morning off from his agency across the Bay in San Francisco, was here to look the big Victorian house over. He'd parked his Mercedes two blocks downhill, walked up here, and identified himself to one of the security guards.

Now, as he started up the flagstone path toward the high, narrow wooden house, someone hailed him from amid the circle of vehicles.

"Max, over here, if you would." It was Alex Mavity, decked out in a black overcoat and holding a black umbrella over his head.

"Oughtn't you to be inside giving technical advice?" He made his way across the wet grass and tangle of electric cables to Tricia's husband.

"They're shooting a love scene between me and Sylvie," explained Mavity. "It's a very difficult thing to watch, so I stepped outside."

"Want to be careful you don't catch cold."

Mavity said, "I know you think I'm giving Trish a rough time. That's one of the reasons I wanted to—"

"She asked me to find out how and why this production was being haunted," Max said. He wasn't sheltered by the umbrella, and rain fell on his bare head. "When I phoned the director, Lew Moonstone, last night, he seconded the request."

"I'm as anxious as anyone to have things run smoothly," Mavity assured him. "But I think Tricia's given you a false scent to follow."

"Oh, so?"

"She believes the spirit of Sylvie Dahlman drove Heather Redfield from the house last weekend and has been playing disruptive pranks on the cast and crew of 'That Wonderful Summer' ever since."

"You don't agree?"

"If we're really dealing with the supernatural here — and I have my doubts — it certainly isn't the ghost of Sylvie. You've read my books?"

"Some of them."

"Then you know Sylvie was a demure, sensitive young woman." Fishing out his pipe, he put it in his

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mouth. "She didn't go in for pranks and low tricks of the sort that have been plaguing us."

"Death can change people."

"Please, Max, I really think I know Sylvie better than just about anyone. She wasn't nasty and clownish."

"So what's causing the troubles?"

Mavity puffed on the dead pipe. "Poltergeists, perhaps," he answered. "And don't rule out the possibility that Heather's agent may be faking—"

"Yesterday the cameraman floated nearly up to the ceiling in the library," Max said. "Day before, a suit of clothes walked into a scene and dance a jig."

"Special effects," said Mavity. "A goon like Rex Golumb would be able to hire technical—"

Inside the house someone started screaming.

Taking his leave of Mavity, Max went sprinting into the place.

In the center of the living room, a lovely blonde young woman was pressing her hands to her chest and screaming.

The handsome young man facing her was struggling, unsuccessfully, to pull up his pants. The pants were down around his ankles and resisting his tugging.

Suddenly the actor was flipped over, his head bonking the oriental carpet. He hung suspended in an improbable handstand until the trousers were yanked completely free.

The surrounding crew, the director, and the cameraman were only now starting to move and yell.

"I'm not amused by this." The small, dark Lew Moonstone was scowling at the now floating pair of pants.

Drifting down to the floor, the pants took shape, thrust out their seat toward the annoyed director, and then went skipping over the cables and wires on the floor.

Max followed the animated trousers down the hall and into the library.

"I'd like to talk with you," Max told the pants. "Maybe we can—"

From off a pile of books on the heavy claw-footed desk, an unseen hand selected a volume. It came sailing straight at Max.

He dodged, getting nicked in the ear by the cover as the book rushed by.

The actor's pants now lay in a tangle on the hardwood floor.

Nodding, rubbing at his ear, Max bent and picked up the book the spirit had tried to conk him with. It was a hardcover copy of *Sylvie Dahlman — Her Bright and Tragic Life.*

Max was in his underwear, pacing his beam-ceilinged bedroom. "Is the furnace dying?"

Jillian was already in bed. "That's Stephanie's stereo you're hearing."

"Stereos don't make that kind of noise when they're expiring."

"She's playing her latest record purchase."

Reaching out, Max touched the wall. "It's causing the whole house to

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wobble off its foundation," he pointed out. "Another few tracks and we'll go sliding down into the Bockmans' pool."

"New group called Yellow Jaundice," Jillian said. "Very popular with affluent fourteen-year-olds. Now get back to the case."

"It's not a case. Only professional occult investigators work on cases," he explained as he resumed pacing. "I'm an amateur, and so—"

"In the many years we've been together, you've solved dozens of supernatural cases, Max," his wife reminded him. "That makes you a pro. Quit with the modesty, get down to details."

Max crossed, sat on the edge of their bed. "The Dahlman house has a resident spirit."

"Whose?"

"Mavity tried to persuade me it's a poltergiest, " he said. "But it isn't."

"Sylvie Dahlman?"

He nodded. "She's annoyed about something."

"Could be she doesn't want the story of her intimate romance with Alex turned into a TV show."

"That's part of it." Max stood, commenced pacing. "After I witnessed her latest disruptive prank and poked around the house, I wandered over to the UC campus. In the English Department, I found a couple people who knew Sylvie and Alex back when."

Jillian watched him circling the bed. "What'd you find out?"

"Mavity's version of what went on between them and what Sylvie was really like may not be accurate."

"But he's the leading authority on Sylvie Dahlman."

"After she killed herself, Alex arranged with some distant kin — her parents and immediate relatives were all dead and gone — to take charge of all her papers, files, and so on. Making it tough for anyone else to do a thorough book about her."

"Well, that's only fair, isn't it? They were lovers."

"According to Alex, Sylvie was a quiet, demure girl, above pranks and fooling," he said. "That's not exactly how other people saw her, though."

Jillian asked, "What else does her spirit want, do you think?"

"We'll find out tomorrow night at the Dahlman place."

"Max, are you going to try a—"

"A séance, yep."

"That could be dangerous."

"It could," he agreed.

Thunder shook the house, rattling windows and shutters. The heavy night rain pelted the Dahlman house.

"Dopey," observed Heather Redfield.

"Listen, this might turn out to be," whispered Rex Golumb, "an exploitable situation."

"Séances are dumb."

"'*Actress Gets Acting Tips from Ghost!*' That sounds—"

"'*Actress Fires Dumb Agent!*'"

"C'mon, Heather. Play along with this and—"

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"O.K., O.K. I'm here, but don't push your luck."

The actress and her agent were seated at the big round table Max had moved into the library. Also present were Lew Moonstone, the director of "That Wonderful Summer"; Tricia and Alex Mavity; Bosco Finn, the young actor who was playing Alex in the miniseries; and Jillian.

"I'm wondering," said Mavity, taking his unlit pipe out of his mouth, "how wise this is, Max."

"It's a tried and true way of communicating with—"

"No, I'm not talking about the nonsensical notion that anyone can actually set up a dialogue between the living and dead. What concerns me is the effect on the morale of all concerned. I agreed to attend after Trish persuaded me that this little dramatic interlude might help clear the air, yet—"

"I believe in what you're up to, Max," said Tricia. "And despite his assumed attitude of disbelief, Alex is frightened at the possibility of—"

"Trish, this isn't the proper setting for criticizing my—"

"We'll start," Max informed them.

Jillian left her chair, turned off the lights, and returned to the table.

After lighting the three candles at the center of the table, Max instructed, "Everybody hold hands."

"Dopey," muttered Heather.

"I'm going to recite a few spells and incantations," Max said. "Then we'll try to contact the spirit of Sylvie. . . ." He paused, turning to watch Heather.

The young actress had suddenly gone rigid. Her eyes were opened wide and staring. "No need for all the crap, Kearny," she said in a new voice. "I'm here."

"Quit futzing around, Heather," cautioned her agent. "Let him get on with—"

"Button your lip, Golumb. I don't know how long I can inhabit this bimbo's body, so let me get down to business."

"Jeez." The agent let go of her hand, leaning away.

Max nodded at Heather. "You want to talk to Alex, don't you, Sylvie?"

"You bet I do."

"Now that's love," remarked Bosco Finn. "Coming back from the dead to—"

"Hush up, beefcake," said Sylvie.

Mavity dropped his pipe to the tabletop. "The voice is vaguely like Sylvie's, granted. Not a bad job of mimicry, Heather, considering you—"

"Stop babbling, schmuck, and listen to me," said the voice coming out of Heather Redfield. "I'm Sylvie, and there are a few things I have to say to you."

"This is hardly the place, if you are indeed my long-lost Sylvie, for tender expressions."

"That's one of the main things we have to settle, putz," said Sylvie. "This crapola that you and I ever had some kind of thing going."

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"Sylvie, our love has endured for—"

"I never even *liked* you, schlepp. I let you hang around because I felt sorry for you, and since you volunteered to do my typing for me, it wasn't a complete—"

"Sylvie, being dead has changed you from—"

"Remember what I used to tell you? You should've written paperback romances because you've got the imagination of a —"

"I happen to be a scholar, a writer who researches into—"

"Alex, we never had an affair. We were never in love, we sure as hell never had a wonderful summer. Or a wonderful winter, spring, or fall. We never even had a wonderful Tuesday," continued Sylvie. "That's all fiction that you cooked up after I was dead and couldn't disagree. You know damn well you never turned me on, because I told you so a dozen times. The only time I even kissed you was during that damn Christmas party where I put too much rum in the punch."

Very quietly, Tricia asked, "Is any of this true, Alex?"

He had both elbows on the table and was staring across at the possessed Heather. "Well, Trish, I guess I exaggerated some. I was young when I wrote the first book about Sylvie, young and still desperately in love with—"

"What you've turned me into, schmuck, is a fictional character," complained Sylvie. "And a second-rate one, to boot. The Sylvie Dahlman in all those god-awful books is a prim, prissy dryball who—"

"You've read my books, then, Sylvie? That makes me very happ—"

"I tried to. Yikes, talk about verbose and clumsy."

"Your own prose isn't all that great," said Tricia, angry.

Mavity asked, "How exactly does a disembodied spirit read a—"

"Never the spectral details, schlepp. I've got a few more things to bring up. I am really pissed off at the way—"

"Sylvie, you ought not to use language like—"

"There you go again. You were always bitching about the way I—"

"I loved you, I sensed your greatness."

"See? That's the kind of stuff I had to put up with from you, and I just couldn't discourage you. All the practical jokes I rigged up, you never understood," Sylvie went on. "And then the last big prank I set up . . . well, it really got screwed up."

Mavity frowned at her. "What are you talking about?"

"My so-called suicide. That was only supposed to scare you off. I decided, even with the free typing, you were too much of a pain in the ass to have around, " Sylvie said. "The sight of me at the end of a rope, and the note saying your unwanted attentions had driven me to suicide, were meant to scare you off. After you'd run off, I'd climb down, have a good laugh, and hope you got the point at last."

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"But you were really dead."

"Don't I know that, schmuck? I . . . what can I tell you . . . I must've rigged up the rope wrong. Here I spent most of my life playing tricks on people, and then I foul up the big one."

"You always were somewhat clumsy, Sylvie." It was one more endearing qualit—"

"Alex, you've never mentioned that suicide note," put in his wife. "Not in any of your books."

"It really didn't seem to fit," he said. "It would've hurt Sylvie's image, and mine as—"

"Screw the image. It isn't me at all," said Sylvie. "And you're going to have to stop all this. No books and, sure as hell, no television opus about sweet, pure little Sylvie—"

"How can we stop?" asked Moonstone, rising in his chair. "We've already got nine hundred thousand dollars tied up in this, and the delays you've been causing will run the tab up to—"

"If you don't quit, I'll keep haunting you," she warned. "This is my home ground. I'm powerful enough here to—"

"What's needed," said Max, "is a compromise."

"I don't have to give in. When you're a ghost, you—"

"Suppose Alex agrees not to write about you anymore?"

"Max, I'm already contracted to introduce and edit the *Sylvie Dahlman Notebooks* for—"

"You schlubs haven't even seen all I can do. There's an old family graveyard out back, and I might just raise up some of my relatives. There's Uncle Rodlow, a real—"

"A disclaimer at the start of each episode of 'That Wonderful Summer'" said Max. "Explaining that the show is a work of fiction. Plus a written promise from Alex that he'll keep quiet about you from now on. You, in turn, agree to quit haunting the production."

"Why the hell should I, Kearny? You—"

"Outside this mansion, you don't have any power. When Alex gets back to L.A., he can go on writing whatever he wants, make up all sorts of imaginary scenes of love and affection between you two."

"I can sure try to stop him."

"But you won't succeed. Your spirit is tied to this house," said Max. "Which is why you've never been able to reach him before this. One other thing . . . I'm pretty good at exorcising ghosts. Maybe I'll run you out of here, too."

After a few seconds, Sylvie caused Heather to give an affirmative nod. "O.K., if he puts it in writing. And gives you the document to keep, Kearny."

"Wait now," said Alex. "Everybody is taking liberties with my right to—"

"Alex," said his wife, "do it."

"But my whole career has been—"

"That's another reason for quitting."

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He looked across at Heather, then away. "Very well, I'll capitulate. For the sake of the rest of you, to save the production of what I know will be a memorable television—"

"Hurry up, schlepp," urged Sylvie. "I can't hold on in this dumpy body forever."

Jillian produced a sheet of paper and a pen, pushed them down the table. "Use these, Alex."

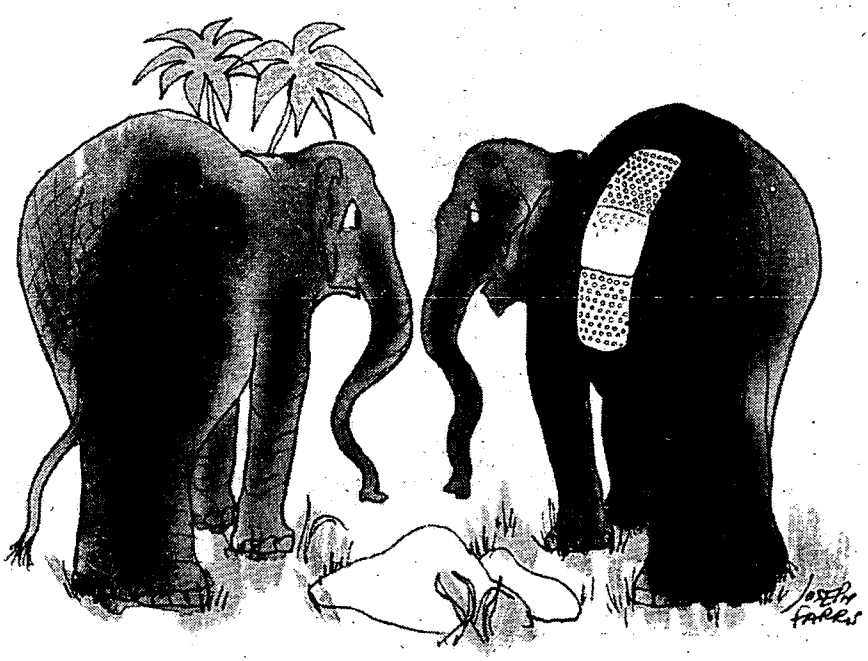
While Mavity wrote, Rex Golumb tapped Heather's arm and asked, "Could you maybe give a quote I can use, Miss Dahlman? About how you think Heather's doing a great job portraying you on the—"

"Schmuck." Heather's body went slack all at once, and she fell forward, pretty head almost hitting the table.

Mavity looked up from his writing. "Sylvie?"

Max said, "She's gone for now."

"She didn't even thank me," Mavity said, shaking his head slowly. "I may have exaggerated the nature of our relationship, but if it hadn't been for me, her novels wouldn't have sold anywhere near as well as they did."



"It's nothing, really. Just a scratch."

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Charles Grant, who has been contributing his subtle and graceful chillers to F&SF for many years, offers a new tale, which he says is about the house he and his wife now own. "We do hear laughter and footsteps in this century-old place. I suppose it's just the pipes..."

The Children, They Laugh So Sweetly

BY
CHARLES L. GRANT

The rain stopped falling after midnight had passed, and it hangs now in the black, a fog newly formed; the streetlamps grow diffused, the branches grow facets, and puddles on the sidewalk reflect nothing but the night until, an hour later, they glaze over with ice. The lawn shades to white. The leaves stiffen. A twig snaps. On the corner a cat puffs its tail and hisses when the first of the day's winds begins to rattle the trees.

The house, not a large one, sits back from the hedge like an old man in the park — somewhat hunched, grayed by weather, its unlatched storm door flapping unevenly like a hand jumping in fitful sleep. Years past its prime, it watches and welcomes the birds that use it for warmth, and when a light is switched on in a room above the porch, an eye snapping open to stare dimly at the lawn, it seems to shift as if startled by the voices it hears.

Peter lowered his hand from the lamp's switch and put a finger to his lips to prevent Esther from questioning the look on his face. After a moment he sat up and cocked his head, turned it, and listened, and heard only the wind and the drip of a faucet.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

He rubbed his eyes with a knuckle, scratched his chest, and blinked. "Dreaming, I think." The tone said he wasn't sure. He listened again and tossed the blanket aside. "You didn't turn the water off."

"Hey, not me, I wasn't the last to use it," she said through a yawn.

He didn't argue; it wasn't worth it. He got out of bed and held his breath against the cold, then hurried into the bathroom to turn both handles as far around as they would go. The

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dripping stopped, and he leaned against the sink for a moment before feeling his way back into the wide hall. Squinting against the bedroom light, he looked left into the spare room and saw nothing but dim furniture shapes and the glowing outlines of windows; to his right was the staircase and another, smaller room whose door was kept closed, the radiator turned off. He had taken a half step toward it when he heard it, when he heard what had broken into his dreams.

Children's laughter, muffled behind a hand; small children enjoying a game and giggling, trying and failing to keep silent as they played.

"Peter!" Esther called, whispering again.

"Shhhh!" as he ducked back into the room and switched off the light.

Softly, and sweetly.

Through the narrow side window, he could see their lawn and hedge, and the distant trees and grass on the other side of a tall fence that wasn't theirs. All of it was empty, and bristing with frost. A glimmer from a shard of glass or a prowling cat's eye, but nothing moving that he could see, out there in the dark.

He started when he heard Esther leave the bed, and joined her at the front, the two of them looking over the sloping porch roof to the grass, hedge, road, houses as dark as theirs should have been this time of the morning when, he thought, dreams were the strongest.

"Boy," she said quietly, took his hand, and drew him into the hall to the stairs and down to the landing, left down into the foyer where the streetlight barely reached, where the dry cold gathered.

He opened the front door and checked the porch as he pulled the storm door and locked it, clenching his teeth against the cold and feeling his muscles tighten. Then he followed his wife's explorations through the double parlor, the dining room, back into the kitchen.

"Nothing," he said, and staggered with a moan against the refrigerator when she switched on the light. "God, you could at least warn a guy, huh?"

"So what are you, a vampire or something?" She wore only a yellow T-shirt that reached halfway to her knees, and most of her dark hair was atumble over her face. She was smiling. "Well?"

"Well what?" He picked his feet up gingerly. "Christ, it's cold! I gotta do something about that damned furnace before we freeze to death come December."

"Well, how'd you do it?"

"Do what? And please, have a heart and turn off the damned light."

She did with a laugh, and settled against his hip when he put his arm around her. "You know . . . the kids."

"Me? I didn't do it. That's what woke me up."

A gust punched at the narrow

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window over the sink and rattled the back door.

"There," she said, nodding decisively toward the wind as they returned to the stairs. "That's what it was."

"I heard kids. You heard kids."

"At three o'clock in the morning? C'mon, Peter. It's an old house. It makes noises."

He didn't care if it made symphonies or Sousa as long as it didn't do it while he was trying to sleep. It was bad enough the place wasn't as perfect as they had thought when they bought it. Since moving in the June before, they had discovered a hundred hidden defects, each more expensive to repair than the last, each inevitably postponing the new car, the vacation, the interior renovations they had wanted to make to bring the century-old Victorian in line with its elegant neighbors.

"Hey," she said gently in the dark of the bedroom, "don't worry about it, O.K.? I think it's neat."

He nodded as he fell asleep wondering what the hell was so great about someone else's children, was awake and eating breakfast before he remembered. Esther was already gone, off to find draperies for the six-foot windows, and, with a bit of luck, locate an inexpensive shop for wallpaper to cover the faded vines and blossoms that made all the rooms seem too old. He cleaned the dishes, put them away, and walked slowly through the first floor, listening to the floorboards, pressing a palm against doorframes, finally pulling on a sweater and going out to the front yard.

A knowing grin then when he realized as he walked over the browning grass that he was searching for footprints, broken branches, betrayals of the kids who had played there the night before. And of course there was nothing he could not blame on the squirrels.

The grin faded, and he stopped at the hedge wall on the property's north side and peered through it. On the other side was the chain-link fence that canted away from him at the top and was strung with barbed wire; beyond that the reach of the Memorial Park itself, though the first of the headstones was almost a hundred yards away.

Jesus, he thought with a sharp shake of his head; the sun is out, the sky is blue, and you're walking around hunting for bloody ghosts, for God's sake.

Feeling suddenly exposed and foolish, he returned to the porch steps and thrust his hands in his pockets, looking left down the street. The trees here were nearly as tall as the house and, despite the bright sunlight, somewhat gloomy without their leaves. There was no activity in any of the yards — the kids were in school, the adults off to work. As far as he could tell, he was the only man on the block who didn't have a job.

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Esther did by the end of the day, however, and they celebrated that night by ripping a hole in their budget to buy steak and champagne. A miracle, he said; luck, she corrected. She had stopped in at the library to see what they had, and started talking with a woman whose husband turned out to be the editor of the local paper. Who was also, it turned out, looking for a secretary to start in two weeks when his old one left to join the ranks of new mothers.

"A miracle, like I said," Peter told her with a laugh.

"Luck," she insisted. "If I'd gone to the store like I should have, I never would have met the woman. I was in the right place at the right time." She emptied her glass and poured herself another. "It has to be luck, Peter, because that would mean ours is finally changing."

His smile was the best he could give her, while he couldn't help wondering if that was a crack about his status.

Never mind, he decided when he finally staggered off to bed; and never mind the next day when he worked in the yard, raking leaves into the gutters and cutting back the hedge. When Esther returned from the paint-and-paper store, he strode into the kitchen feeling damned good.

She was at the sink, the water running, no dishes to clean.

The line of her back told him there was trouble.

"Why did you tell me you'd gone to the school board?" she asked as she turned to watch him warm his hands with dry scrubbing.

He licked his lips and almost said that he had, but the dark expression on her face killed the lie in his throat. "I didn't want you to worry."

"Worry!" Her right hand became a fist that pushed her hair back. "Worry? Jesus Christ, Peter, what the hell were you thinking of?"

A shrug, and he walked slowly into the living room to flop onto the couch.

"And don't pull that Hamlet act on me, you hear? It doesn't work anymore." She stood in the doorway, trembling. "I saw that Mrs. Player on Center Street, the woman from the school board you called that time. She asked me when you were going to submit your application. They need substitutes badly, she said. And I could only stand there like a jackass because you told me you'd already done it!"

"I—"

"No!" she said, chopping the air with one hand. "Don't you dare give me that crap about not wanting to teach anymore. I don't want to hear a thing about being burned out and fed up and not caring anymore." She took a step into the room, and he flinched. "We are almost broke, Pete, do you understand that? The money is almost gone. If you don't—"

He waited for the threat, then

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looked up. She was gone, and there was no sense going after her. Nor was there any sense in feeling sorry for himself. He had played every game in the book, most of them more than once, and his luck had run out.

His legs stretched out under the coffee table; his arms extended along the back of the couch.

It wasn't true that he didn't like teaching anymore; it was everything that had gone with it that had finally worn him down — the students were undisciplined, but the administration seldom backed him; the administration was too busy figuring budgets and manpower to give a damn about education, decent or otherwise; and education became a conveyor belt on which students rode, the teacher machines stamping "passed" on their foreheads, a word half the kids couldn't read.

In the beginning, shortly after they married, Esther had agreed with him, and wasn't dismayed when they moved to Oxrun Station after his last position had been eliminated because of a cut in school funds. There was, after all, a reasonable amount left from his parents' estate, and they had used it to purchase the house on Northland Avenue — investing in their future instead of losing it on rent. But she had also counted on his finding a job to supplement her own, up-until-now temporary income; she had not counted on him being apparently untrained and unfit for anything but standing in front of a class.

He was afraid he would lose her, so he'd lied about his efforts.

"Dumb," he said to the fireplace and hearth. "Really and truly dumb, Peter Hughes."

That night he slept alone, though she was in bed beside him.

The following day he worked in the yard while Esther went to the *Herald* to see what she'd be doing. And when she returned she ignored him, though he could see she had recently been crying.

Dumb, he thought as he raked the leaves hard across the grass; dumb, stupid, idiot, jackass.

And that night he was awakened by an elbow in his side. He pushed at it; it returned; and it was several seconds before he realized she was trying to get him up. He nearly asked her why, until he heard it downstairs — the sweet quiet laughter, the ripple of giggles.

And something else a moment later — the tread of someone small slowly coming up the stairs.

A look at the windows filled with moonlight, a look at the clock on the nightstand. Then he swung his legs over and crept cautiously around the bed, realizing as he reached the door that he didn't have a weapon. He hesitated while Esther watched him, then decided he would simply have to rely on surprise — he could stand against the wall and kick the intruder when he reached the top step.

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He moved, then, and he waited, and saw his skin turn to marble in the light of the moon.

But when he finally poked his head around the corner, the stairwell was empty, and the laughter had stopped a long while ago. He considered returning to bed and laughing it off, changed his mind and went downstairs, just in case. The rooms were all empty, doors and windows locked from the inside. The kitchen clock marked four in the morning, but the night felt closer to dawn.

She was asleep by the time he returned, and he wished a silent curse at the sheet now icy cold, lay staring at the ceiling, wondering about the house and the noises it made.

"The pipes," she said at breakfast. "Air in them, the cold — the wood contracts and expands when the heat escapes at night."

"All figured out, huh?" he said lightly, pleased she was at least speaking to him again.

"Nothing to it."

"No ghosts?"

She gave him a smile and a lift of an eyebrow. "I'd like that, actually, wouldn't you? Some kids maybe murdered here a hundred years ago, trying to find their way back to ... I don't know ... wherever kid ghosts are supposed to go."

"Sounds good," he said; "but as I recall, no kids ever lived here. And no one ever died here."

"Jesus, you are no fun, Peter, you know that? You aren't any fun at all anymore." Her coat was on, a woolen cap and mittens. "What are you doing today?"

He shrugged, and she left without giving him a kiss; he sat there for an hour, then dressed in a good suit, and, with a nod to the guilt that filled his stomach with acid, he walked to the board of education office, where he filled out an application for substitute teaching, and on impulse walked the two miles out to Hawksted College and did the same.

The day was cold, staining his cheeks and forehead an angry red, but he didn't mind it once he fell into stride. The snap of the wind, the swift gray of the clouds, the feel and sound of his heels on the pavement forced him to think for the first time without self-pity what it was that had failed him in the classroom, what it was that had made him reach out to the kids, and pull back when he thought he couldn't take it anymore.

He had deserted them, no question about it; he had deserted them and run away.

Not bad, he thought; it might even be true.

Afterward he wandered into the park and stood at the edge of the playing field, watching a gang of youngsters from the grammar school across the street having races with another class. They shrieked, they cheated, they wrestled, they laughed, and he couldn't help noticing how

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miserable their teachers looked, how they seemed to wish a miracle truck would appear and mow their classes down.

He shuddered and turned away, disgusted at the idea, sickened by the notion he must have looked like that, too, toward the end, before he quit.

When Esther finally returned from the *Herald*, dinner was ready, "I still haven't forgiven you," she said when he told her about his day, about everything but the park. "But thanks for doing the cooking."

"You ought to be getting paid, y'know?" he said. "All the time you're spending at the paper before you're supposed to start working, I mean."

"But they're nice," she told him, helping him clear the table and wash the dishes. "They really care about you, they want to make you feel right at home."

"It's a small town."

The telephone rang before he could answer, and when he returned to help put away the plates, he was grinning.

"What?" she said suspiciously. "You win the lottery or something?"

"Not quite as good; not so bad, either. A second-grade teacher's been in a car accident over in Harley. Nothing serious, she's O.K.," he said hastily to Esther's concern. "A bump on the head and a couple of cuts, but she's taking the rest of the week off. I get to cover."

"Oh, God," she said, and embraced him warmly. "God, Peter, I'm so glad I could bust!"

"Yeah," he said, frowning into her hair. "Yeah, me, too."

"You know, if you impress them," she said hesitantly, "you might be able to find yourself with a permanent job there, not just substituting."

"It crossed my mind," he lied, and was relieved when at last she lifted her face to kiss him. One crisis over; now all he had to do was figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

He was still thinking about it after they'd watched some television, taken a communal and long shower, and she fell asleep before he could reach for her, to cuddle.

There's always the local supermarket, he thought. Unload a few trucks, work the register, maybe even get to be manager of the produce section. It ain't rich, but it's a living. Or a shoe store. The bookstore. With the two of them working, they might even be comfortable.

And when he felt himself scowling at every suggestion made, he couldn't believe he'd jeopardize both his and Esther's future just because of damned pride. Jesus, he was going back to work tomorrow, at what he was trained to do. Why the hell couldn't he see it as a sign or something? Why the goddamned hell couldn't he be as happy as his wife?

He dozed, half-dreaming and not remembering a thing.

He woke to soft silence, turned

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his head, and saw the snow — large flakes clinging like white spiders to the panes, drifting past the streetlamps to bury the lawn, turn the hedge to a wall, make the black behind it deeper, colder.

And the laughter, just as soft, down in the foyer.

"You hear it?" Esther whispered, nearly frightening him to death. When he nodded and made to rise, she put a firm hand on his shoulder. "My turn. I've always wanted to see what a ghost looked like."

Still drowsy, and angry at himself, he grunted and watched her shadow leave the room, heard the steps creak under her weight, and heard the laughing continue.

Suddenly the room chilled, and he jumped from the bed and ran out to the hall.

"Esther!"

Giggling behind a hand, from downstairs, from behind him, from the attic above.

"Esther, you see anything?"

The distant rumble of the furnace, and the radiators popping, clanking, hissing their steam.

He was halfway down the steps when the furnace clicked off, and the silence that replaced it made him hold his breath and pause.

"Hey, Esther, knock it off, huh?"

The streetlight from the front was too dim for details, strong enough for shadows, and he waited until his eyes adjusted before moving down to the landing and scanning the foyer.

He wanted to call his wife's name again, but he listened instead.

To the silence.

To the snow.

To the fill of his lungs as he took the last steps and took hold of the doorknob. It was locked, from the inside.

The parlors were empty, the dining room, the kitchen.

It was a trick. It was long past midnight, and she was playing goddamn tricks when she knew damned well he had to get up in the morning and go stand in front of a bunch of empty-brained, unfeeling, goddamned spoiled little brats.

She knew that! Goddamnit, she knew that and she—

Oh, hell, he thought.

"Esther, c'mon, the fun's over."

He hesitated at the cellar door, then flung it open and went down, slapping at the light switch and cursing when it failed. Before he took another step, he grabbed a flashlight from a drawer, tried the lights in all the rooms, and damned the damn fuses.

The fuses were fine.

She wasn't in the basement.

He couldn't think of anything else then but someone, maybe two or three, throwing a blanket over her head and dragging her from the house. He raced back to the bedroom and dressed as warmly as he could, picked up the telephone to call the police,

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and stared at the receiver when the dial tone failed.

"Esther!"

All the windows and doors were locked as before — from the inside, never opened.

He searched the closets, the pantry, looked under the couch and chairs, moved standing lamps and hassocks, kicked the rugs and checked the attic. When his voice grew hoarse from calling, he leaned against the kitchen door and looked out at the yard, blinking, nearly weeping, at the snow an inch deep and as smooth as the moonlight that had been there before.

He looked out every window, went out to the porch, and stood at the railing to stare at the street.

Nothing but the snow, falling silently white.

And when his teeth began to chatter, he returned inside, went up the steps to the bedroom, and dropped the flashlight on the floor. Then he sat on the bed and stared out the window. Sooner or later she would tire of the game and come back to him, kid him a little about the neat hiding place she'd found, then listen when he told her how often he had lied. It wasn't, he would say, the system, or the administration, or the parents, or even the lousy pay. It was the kids. It was always the kids — somewhere in there he had started to hate them.

And tomorrow he was going to hate them again.

He waited until he felt the cold enter the house, until the snow thickened, the silence deepened, and he knew without reason he wouldn't see her again.

Then he heard the laughter, soft and sweet, filling the house downstairs.

They know, he thought; they know the way kids do, and they don't want me back.

Giggling; quiet running.

"Esther?" he whispered, crushing a pillow to his chest.

They weren't ghosts at all.

They were only his nightmares.

Soft.

And sweet.

And coming up the stairs.

F&SF COMPETITION: The report on competition 38 will appear in next month's issue.

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Lythande is a mercenary-magican who figured in Marion Zimmer Bradley's "Somebody Else's Magic" (October 1984). In this new tale, the young wizard matches her skills against a beautiful — and deadly — menace from the sea.

Sea Wrack

BY

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

The crimson eye of Keth hovered near the horizon, with the smaller sun of Reth less than an hour behind. At this hour the fishing fleet should have been sailing into the harbor. But there was no sign of any fleet; only a single boat, far out, struggling against the tide.

Lythande had walked far that day along the shore, enjoying the solitude and singing old, soft sea-songs to the sounds of the surf. Tonight, surely, the Pilgrim-Adept thought, supper must be earned by singing to the lute, for in a simple place like this there would be none to need the services of a mercenary magician, no need for spells or magics, only simple folk, living simply to the rhythms of sea and tides.

Perhaps it was a holiday; all the boats lay drawn up along the shore. But there was no holiday feel in the single street: angry knots of men sat clumped together scowling and talking in low voices, while a little group of women were staring out to sea, watching the single boat struggling against the tide.

"Women! By the blinded eyes of Keth-Ketha, how are women to handle a boat?" one of the men snarled. "How are they to handle fishing nets? Curse that —"

"Keep your voice down," admonished a second, "That — that thing might hear, and wake!"

Lythande looked out into the bay and saw what had not been apparent before; the approaching boat was crewed, not by men, but by four hearty half-grown girls in their teens. Their muscular arms were bare to the shoulder, skirts tucked up to the knee, their feet clumsy in sea-boots. They seemed to be handling the nets com-

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petently enough; and were evidently enormously strong, the kind of women who, if they had been milking a cow, could sling the beast over their shoulder and fetch it home out of a bog. But the men were watching with a jealous fury poorly concealed.

"Tomorrow I take my own boat out, and the lasses stay home and bake bread where they belong!"

"That's what Leukas did, and you know what happened to him — his whole crew wrecked on the rocks, and — and something, some *thing* out there ate boat and all! All they ever found was his hat, and his fishing net chewed half-through! An' seven sons for the village to feed till they're big enough to go out to the fishing —that's supposing we ever have any more fishing around here, and that whatever-it-is out there ever goes away again!"

Lythande raised a questioning eyebrow. Some menace, to the mercenary magician. Though Lythande bore two swords, girdled at the narrow waist of the mage-robe, the right-hand sword for the everyday menace of threatening humankind or natural beast, the left-hand sword to slay ghost or ghast or ghoul or any manner of supernatural menace, the Adept had no intention of here joining battle against some sea-monster. For that the village must await some hero or fighting man. Lythande was magician and minstrel, and though the sword was for hire where there was need, the Adept had no love for ordinary warfare, and less for fighting some menacing thing needing only brute strength and not craft.

There was but one inn in the village; Lythande made for it, ordered a pot of ale, and sat in the corner, not touching it — one of the vows fencing the power of an Adept of the Blue Star was that they might never be seen to eat or drink before men —but the price of a drink gave the mage a seat at the center of the action, where all the news of the village could be heard. They were still grousing about the fear that kept them out of the water. One man complained that already the ribs of his boat were cracking and drying and would need mending before he could put it back into the water.

"If there's ever to be any fishing here again. . ."

"Ye could send the wife and daughters out in the boat like Lubert —"

"Better we all starve or eat porridge for all our lives!"

"If we ha' no fish to trade for bread or porridge, what then?"

"Forgive my curiosity," Lythande said in the mellow, neutral voice that marked a trained minstrel, "but if a sea-monster is threatening the shore, why should women be safe in a boat when men are not?"

It was the wife of the innkeeper who answered her. "If it was a sea-monster, we could go out there, all of us, even with fish-spears, and kill it,

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like the plainsmen do with the tusk-beasts. It's a mermaid, an' she sits and sings and lures our menfolk to the rocks — look yonder at my good-man," she said in a lowered voice, pointing to a man who sat apart before the fire, back turned to the company, clothing all unkempt, shirt half-buttoned, staring into the fire. His fingers fiddled nervously with the lacings of his clothing, snarling them into loops.

"He heard her," she said in a tone of such horror that hearing, the little hairs rose and tingled on Lythande's arms and the Blue Star between the magician's brows began to crackle and send forth lightnings. "He *heard* her, and his men dragged him away from the rocks. And there he sits from that day to this — him that was the jolliest man in all this town, staring and weeping and I have to feed him like a little child, and never take my eyes off him for half a minute or he'll walk out into the sea and drown, and there are times" — her voice sank in despair —"I'm minded to let him go, for he'll never have his wits again — I even have to guide him out to the privy, for he's forgotten even that!" And indeed, Lythande could see a moist spreading stain on the man's trousers, while the woman hastened, embarrassed, to lead her husband outside.

Lythande had seen the man's eyes; empty, lost, not seeing his wife, staring at something beyond the room.

Far from the sea, Lythande had heard tales of mermaids, of their enchantments and their songs. The minstrel in Lythande had half-desired to hear those songs, to walk on the rocks and listen to the singing that could, it was said, make the hearer forget all the troubles and joys of the world. But after seeing the man's empty eyes, Lythande decided to forgo the experience.

"And that is why some of the women have gone in the boats?"

"Not women," said the innkeeper's potboy, stopping with a tray of tankards to speak to the stranger, "girls too young for men. For they say that to women, it calls in the voice of their lover — Natzer's wife went out last full moon, swearing she'd bring in fish for her children at least, and no one ever saw her again; but a hank of her hair, all torn and bloody, came in on the tide."

"I never heard that a mermaid was a flesh-eater," Lythande observed.

"Nor I. But I think she sings, and lures 'im on the rocks, where the fishes eat them...."

"There is the old strategem," Lythande suggested. "Put cotton or wax plugs in your ears —"

"Say, stranger," said a man belligerently, "you think we're all fools out here? We tried that; but she sits on the rocks and she's so beautiful ... the men went mad, just seeing her, threw me overboard — you can't blindfold yourself, not on the sea with

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the rocks and all — there's never been a blind fisherman and never will. I swam ashore, and they drove the boat on the rocks, and only the blinded eyes of Keth-Ketha know where they've gone, but no doubt somewhere in the Sea-God's lockup." Lythande turned to face the man, he saw the Blue Star shining out from under the mage-robe and demanded, "Are you a spell-speaker?"

"I am a Pilgrim-Adept of the Blue Star," Lythande said gravely, "and while mankind awaits the Final Battle of Law and Chaos, I wander the world seeking what may come."

"I heard of the Temple of the Blue Star," said one woman fearfully. "Could you free us of this mermaid wi' your magic?"

"I do not know. I have never seen a mermaid," said Lythande, "and I have no great desire for the experience."

Yet why not? Under the world of the Twin Suns, in a life lasting more than most people's imaginations could believe, the Pilgrim-Adept had seen most things, and the mermaid was new. Lythande pondered how one would attack a creature whose only harm seemed to be that it gave forth with beautiful music — so beautiful that the hearer forgot home and family, loved ones, wife or child; and if the hearer escaped — Lythande shuddered. It was not a fate to be desired — sitting day after day staring into the fire, longing only to hear again that song.

Yet whatever magic could make, could be unmade again by magic. And Lythande held all the magic of the Temple of the Blue Star, having paid a price more terrifying than any other Adept in the history of the Pilgrim-Adepts. Should that magic now be tried against the unfamiliar magic of a mermaid?

"We are dying and hungering," said the woman. "Isn't that enough? I believed wizards were sworn to free the world from evil —"

"How many wizards have you known?" asked Lythande.

"None, though my mother said her granny told her, once a wizard came and done away wi' a sea-monster on them same rocks."

"Time is a great artificer," said Lythande, "for even wizards must live, my good woman; the pride of magic, while a suitable diversion while we all await the burning out of the Twin Suns and the Final Battle between Law and Chaos, puts no beans on the table. I have no great desire to test my powers against your mermaid, and I'll wager you anything you like that yonder old wizard charged your town a pretty penny for ridding the world of that sea-monster."

"We have nothing to give," said the innkeeper's wife, "but if you can restore my man, I'll give you my gold ring that he gave me when we were wedded. And since he's been enchanted, what kind of man are you if you can't take away one magic with anoth-

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er?" She tugged at her fat finger, and held out the ring, thin and worn, in the palm of her hand. Her fingers clung to it, and there were tears in her eyes, but she held it out valiantly.

"What kind of man am I?" Lythande asked with an ironic smile. "Like none you will ever see. I have no need of gold, but give me tonight's lodging, and I will do what I can."

The woman slid the ring back on her hand with shaking fingers. "My best chamber. But, oh, restore him! Or would ye have some supper first?"

"Work first, then pay," said Lythande. The man was sitting again in the corner by the fire, staring into the flames, and from his lips came a small, tuneless humming. Lythande unslung the lute in its bag, and took it out, bending over the strings. Long, thin fingers strayed over the keys, head bent close as Lythande listened for the sound, tuning and twisting the pegs that held the strings.

At last, touching the strings, Lythande began to play. As the sound of the lute stole through the big common room, it was as if the chinks letting in the late sun had widened, and the light spread in the room; Lythande played sunlight and the happy breeze on the shore. Softly, on tiptoe, not wanting to let any random sound interrupt the music, the people in the inn stole nearer to listen to the soft notes. Sunlight, the shore winds, the sounds of the soft, splashing waves. Then Lythande began to sing.

Afterward — and for years, all those who heard often spoke of it — no one could remember what song was sung, though to everyone it sounded familiar, so that every hearer was sure it was a song they had heard at their mother's knee. To everyone it called, in the voice of husband or lover or child or wife, the voice of the one most loved. One old man said, with tears in his eyes, that he had heard his mother singing him to sleep with an old lullaby he had not heard in more than half a century. And at last, even the man who sat by the fire, clothes unkempt and stinking, hair rough and tangled, and his eyes lost in another world, slowly raised his head and turned to listen to the voice of Lythande, soft contralto or tenor; neutral, sexless, yet holding all the sweetness of either sex. Lythande sang of the simple things of the world, of sunlight and rain and wind, of the voices of children, of grass and wind and harvest and the silences of dawn and twilight. Then, the tempo quickening a little, she sang of home and fireside, where the children gathered in the evening, calling to their fathers to come home from the sea. And at last, the soft voice deepening and growing quieter so that the listeners had to lean forward to hear it, yet every whispered note clearly audible even to the rafters of the inn, Lythande sang of love.

And the eyes of every man widened, and the cheek of every woman

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reddened to a blush, yet to the innocent children there, every word was innocent as a mother's kiss on their cheek.

And when the song fell silent, the man by the fireside raised his head and brushed the tears from his eyes.

"Mhari, lass," he said hoarsely, "where are ye — ye and the babes —why, ha' I been sitting here the daylong and not out to the fishing? Why, lass, ye're crying, what ails the girl?" And he drew her to his knee and kissed her, and his face changed, and he shook his head, bewildered.

"Why, I dreamed — I dreamed —" His face contorted, but the woman drew his head down on her breast, and she, too, was weeping.

"Don't think of it, goodman, ye' were enchanted, but by the mercy of the gods and this good wizard here, ye're safe home and yourself again...."

He rose, his hands straying to his uncombed hair and unshaven chin. "How long? Aye, what devil's magic kept me here? And" — he looked around, seeing Lythande laying the lute in the case — "what brought me back? I owe ye gratitude, Lord Wizard," he said. "All my poor house may offer is at your command." His voice held the dignity of a poor workingman, and Lythande bent graciously to acknowledge it.

"I will take a lodging for the night, and a meal served in private in my room, no more." And though both the fisherman and his wife pressed Lythande to accept the ring and other gifts, even to the profits of a year's fishing, the wizard would accept nothing more.

But the others in the room crowded near, clamoring.

"No such magic has ever been seen in these parts! Surely you can free us, with your magic, from this evil wizardry! We beg you, we are at your mercy — we have nothing worthy of you, but such as we can, we will give...."

Lythande listened, impassive, to the pleading. It was to be expected; magic had been demonstrated, and knowing what it could do, they were greedy for more. Yet it was not greed alone. Their lives and their livelihood were at stake. These poor folk could not continue to live by the fishing if the mermaid continued to lure them onto the rocks, to be wrecked or eaten by sea-monsters, or, if they came safe and alive to their homes, to live on rapt away by the memory.

Yet what reason could this mermaid have for her evildoing? Lythande was well acquainted with the laws of magic, and magical things did not exercise their powers only out of a desire to make mischief among men. Why, after all, had this mermaid come to sing and enchant these simple shore folk? What could her purpose be?

"I will have a meal served in private, that I may consider this," the magician said, "and tomorrow I will speak with everyone in the village

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who has heard this creature's song or looked upon her. And then I will decide whether my magic can do anything for you. Further than that I will not go."

When the woman had departed, leaving the tray of food, Lythande locked and double-locked the door of the room behind her. A fine baked fish lay on a clean white napkin —Lythande suspected it was the best of the meager catch brought in by the young girls, which alone kept the village from starving. The fish was seasoned with fragrant herbs, and there was a hot, coarse loaf of maize-bread, with butter and cream, and a dish of sweet boiled seaweed on the tray.

First Lythande cast about the room, the Blue Star blazing between the narrow brows, seeking hidden spy-holes or magical traps. Eternal vigilance was the price of safety for any Adept of the Blue Star, even in a village as isolated as this one. It was not likely that some enemy had trailed Lythande here, nor prearranged a trap, but stranger things had happened in the Adept's long life.

But the room was nowhere overlooked and seemed impregnable, so that at last Lythande was free to take off the voluminous mage-robe and even to ungird the belt with the two swords, and draw off the soft dyed-leather boots. So revealed, Lythande presented still the outward appearance of a slender, beardless man, tall and strongly framed and sexless; yet, free of observation, Lythande was revealed as what she was; a woman. Yet a woman who might never be known to be so in the sight of any living man.

A masquerade that had become truth; for into the Temple of the Pilgrim-Adepts, Lythande alone in all their long history had successfully penetrated in male disguise. Not till the Blue Star already shone between her brows, symbol and sign of Adepthood, had she been discovered and exposed; and by then she was sacrosanct, bearing their innermost secrets. And then the Master of the Pilgrim-Adepts had laid on her the doom she still bore.

"So be it; be then in truth what you have chosen to seem. Till Law and Chaos meet in that Final Battle where all things must die, be what you have pretended; for on that day when any Pilgrim-Adept save myself shall proclaim your true sex, on that day is your power forfeit and you may be slain."

So together with all the vows that fenced about the power of a Pilgrim-Adept, Lythande bore this burden as well; that of concealing her true sex to the end of the world.

She was not, of course, the only Adept heavily burdened with a *geas;* every Adept of the Blue Star bore some such Secret in whose concealent, even from other Adepts of the Order, lay all his magic and all his

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strength. Lythande might even have a woman confidante, if she could find one she could trust with her life and her powers.

The minstrel-Adept ate the fish, and nibbled at the boiled seaweed, which was not to her taste; the maize-bread, well wrapped against grease, found its way into the pockets of the mage-robe, against some time when she might not be able to manage privacy for a meal and must snatch a concealed bite as she traveled.

This done; she drew from a small pouch at her waist a quantity of herbs that had no magical properties whatever (unless the property of bringing relaxation and peace to the weary can be counted magical), rolled them into a narrow tube, and set them alight with a spark blazing from the ring she bore. She inhaled deeply, leaned back with her narrow feet stretched out to the fire, for the sea-wind was damp and cold, and considered.

Did she wish, for the prestige of the Order, and the pride of a Pilgrim-Adept, to go out against a mermaid?

Powerful as was the magic of the Blue Star, Lythande knew that somewhere beneath the world of the Twin Suns, a magic might lie next to which a Pilgrim-Adept's powers were mere hearth-magic and trumperies. There were moments when she wearied, indeed, of her long life of concealment and felt she would welcome death, more especially if it came in honorable battle. But these were brief moods of the night, and always when day came, she wakened with renewed curiosity about all the new adventures that might lie around the next bend in the road. She had no wish to cut it short in futile striving against an unknown enemy.

Her music had indeed recalled the enchanted man to himself. Did this mean her magic was stronger than that of the mermaid? Probably not; she had needed only to break through the magical focus of the man's attention, to remind him of the beauty of the world he had forgotten. Then, hearing again, his mind had chosen that real beauty over the false beauty of the enchantment, for beneath the magic that held him entranced, the mind of the man must have been already in despair, struggling to break free. A simple magic and nothing to give overconfidence in her strength against the unknown magic of mermaids.

She wrapped herself in the mage-robe and laid herself down to sleep, halfway inclined to rise before dawn and be far away before anyone in the village was astir. What were the troubles of a fishing village to her? Already she had given them a gift of magic, restoring the innkeeper's husband to himself; what else did she owe them?

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Yet, a few minutes before the ris-

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ing of the pale face of Keth, she woke knowing she would remain. Was it only the challenge of testing an unknown magic against her own? Or had the helplessness of these people touched her heart?

Most likely, Lythande thought with a cynical smile, it was her own wish to see a new magic. In the years she had wandered under the eyes of Keth and Reth, she had seen many magics, and most were simple and almost mechanical, set once in motion and kept going by something not much better than inertia.

Once, she remembered, she had encountered a haunted oak grove, with a legend of a dryad spirit who seduced all male passersby. It had proved to be no more than an echo of a dryad's wrath when spurned by a man she had tried and failed to seduce; her rage and counterspell had persisted more than forty seasons, even when the dryad's tree had fallen, lightning-struck, and withered. The remnants of the spell had lingered till it was no more than an empty grove where women took their reluctant lovers, that the leftover powers of the angry dryad might arouse at least a little lust. Lythande, despite the pleas of the women fearing to lose their husbands to the power of the spell, had not chosen to meddle; the last she heard, the place had acquired a pleasant reputation for restoring potency, at least for a night, to any man who slept there.

The village was already astir. Lythande went out into the reddening sunrise, where the fishermen gathered from habit, though they were not dragging down their boats to the edge of the tide. Seeing Lythande, they left the boats and crowded around.

"Say, wizard, will you help us or no?"

"I have not yet decided," said Lythande. "First I must speak with everyone in the village who has encountered the creature."

"Ye can't do that," said one old man with a fierce grin, "'less ye can walk down into the Sea-God's lockup an' question them down there! Or maybe wizards can do that, too?"

Rebuked, Lythande wondered if she were taking their predicament too lightly. To her, perhaps, it was challenge and curiosity; to these folk it was their lives and their livelihood, their very survival at stake.

"I am sorry; I should have said, of course, those who have encountered the creature and lived." There were not, she supposed, too many of those.

She spoke first to the fisherman she had recalled with her magic. He spoke with a certain self-consciousness, his eyes fixed on the ground away from her.

"I heard her singing, that's all I can remember, and it seemed there was nothing in the world but only that song. Mad, it is, I don't care all that much for music — savin' your presence, minstrel," he added sheep-

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ishly. "Only I heard that song, somehow it was different, I wanted no more than just to listen to it forever...." He stood silent, thoughtful. "For all that, I wish I could remember...." And his eyes sought the distant horizon.

"Be grateful you cannot," Lythande said crisply, "or you would still be sitting by your fire without wit to feed or clean yourself. If you wish my advice, never let yourself think of it again for more than a moment."

"Oh, ye're right, I know that, but still an' all, it was beautiful —" He sighed, shook himself like a great dog, and looked up at Lythande. "I suppose my mates must ha' dragged me away an' back to the shore; next I knew I was sitting by my fireplace listening to your music, minstrel, an' Mhari cryin' and all."

She turned away; from him she had learned no more than she had known before. "Is there anyone else who met the beast, the mermaid, and survived the meeting?"

It seemed there were none; for the young girls who had taken out the boat either had not encountered the mermaid or it had not chosen to show itself to them. At last one of the women of the village said hesitantly, "When first it came, and the men were hearin' it and never coming back, there was Lulie — she went out with some of the women — she didna' hear anything, they say; she can't hear anything, she's been deaf these thirty years. And she says she saw it, but she wouldna' talk about it. Maybe, knowin' what you're intending to do, she'll tell you, magician."

A deaf woman. Surely there was logic to this, as there was logic to all the things of magic if you could only find out the underlying pattern to it. The deaf woman had survived the mermaid because she could not hear the song. Then why had the men of the village been unable to conquer it by the old ruse of plugging their ears with wax?

It attacked the eyes, too, apparently, for one of the men had spoken of it as "so beautiful." This man said he had leaped from the boat and tried to swim ashore. Ashore — or on the rocks toward the creature? She should try to speak with him, too, if she could find him. Why was he not here among the men? Well, first, Lythande decided, she would speak with the deaf woman.

She found her in the village bakeshop, supervising a single crooked-bodied apprentice in unloading two or three limp-looking sacks of poor-quality flour, mixed with husks and straw. The village's business, then, was so much with the fishing that only those who were physically unable to go into the boats found it permissible to follow any other trade.

The deaf woman glowered at Lythande, set her lips tight, and gestured to the cripple to go on with what he was doing, bustling about

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her ovens. The doings of a magician, said her every truculent look, were no business of hers and she wanted nothing to do with them.

She went to the apprentice and stood over him. Lythande was a very tall woman, and he was a wee small withered fellow; as he looked up, he had to tilt his head back. The deaf woman scowled, but Lythande deliberately ignored her.

"I will talk with you," she said deliberately, "since your mistress is too deaf and perhaps too stupid to hear what I have to say."

The little apprentice was shaking in his shoes.

"Oh, no, Lord Magician ... I can't.... She knows every word we say, she reads lips, and I swear she knows what I say even before I say it...."

"Does she indeed?" Lythande said. "So now I know." She went and stood over the deaf woman until she raised her sullen face. "You are Lulie, and they tell me that you met the sea-beast, the mermaid, whatever it is, and that it did not kill you. Why?"

"How should I know?" The woman's voice was rusty as if from long disuse; it grated on Lythande's musical ear.

It was unfair to think ill of a woman because of her misfortune; yet Lythande found herself disliking this woman very much. Distaste made her voice harsh.

"You have heard that I have committed myself to rid the village of this creature that is preying on it." Lythande did not realize that she had, in fact, committed herself until she heard herself say so. "In order to do this, I must know what it is that I face. Tell me all you know of this thing, whatever it may be."

"Why do you think I know anything at all?"

"You survived." And, thought Lythande, I would like to know why, for when I know why it spared this very unprepossessing woman, perhaps I will know what I must do to kill it — if it must be killed, after all. Or would it be enough to drive it away from here?"

Lulie stared at the floor. Lythande knew she was at an impasse; the woman could not hear, and she, Lythande, could not command her with her eyes and presence, or even with her magic, as long as the woman would not meet her eyes. Anger flared in her; she could feel, between her brows, the crackling blaze of the Blue Star; her anger and the blaze of magic reached the baker woman and she looked up.

Lythande said angrily, "Tell me what you know of this creature! How did you survive the mermaid?"

"How am I to know that? I survived. Why? You are the magician, not I; let you tell me that, wizard."

With an effort Lythande moderated her anger. "Yet I implore you, for the safety of all these people, tell me what you know, however little."

"What do I care for the folk of this

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village?" Lythande wondered what her grudge was that her voice should be so filled with wrath and contempt. It was probably useless to try and find out. Grudges were often quite irrational; perhaps she blamed them for her loss of hearing, perhaps for the isolation that had descended on her when, as with many deaf people, she had withdrawn into a world of her own, cut off from friends and kin.

"Nevertheless, you are the only one who has survived a meeting with this thing," Lythande said, "and if you will tell me your secret, I will not tell them."

After a long time the woman said, "It — called to me. It called in the last voice I heard; my child, him that died o' the same fever that lost me my hearing; crying and calling out to me. And so for a time I thought they'd lied to me when they said my boy was dead of the fever, that somehow he lived, out there on the wild shores. I spent the night seeking him. And when the morning came, I came to my senses, and knew if he had lived, he wouldna' call me in that baby voice — he died thirty years ago, by now he'd be a man grown, and how could he have lived all this time alone?" She stared at the floor again, stubbornly.

There was nothing Lythande could say. She could hardly thank the woman for a story Lythande had wrenched from her, if not by force, so near it as not to matter.

So I was on the wrong track, Lythande thought. The deaf woman had not been keeping from Lythande some secret that could have helped to deal with the menace to this village. She was only concealing what would have made her feel a fool.

And who am I to judge her, I who hold a secret deeper and darker than hers?

She had been wrong and must begin again. But the time had not been wasted, not quite, for now she knew that whereas it called to men in the voices of the ones they loved, it was not wholly a sexual enticement, as she had heard some mermaids were. It called to men in the voice of a loved woman; to at least one woman, it had called in the voice of her dead child. Was it, then, that it called to everyone in the voice of what they loved best?

This, then, would explain why the young girls were at least partly immune. Before the power of love came into a life, a young boy or girl loved his parents, yes, but because of the lack of experience, the parents were still seen as someone who could protect and care for the child, not to be selflessly cared for.

Love alone could create that selflessness.

Then — thought Lythande — it will be safe for me to go out against the monster. For there is, now, no one and nothing I love. Never have I loved any man. Such women as I have

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loved are separated from me by more than a lifetime, and I know enough to be wary if any should call to me in the voice of the heart's desire, then I am safe from it. For I love no one, and my heart, if indeed I still have a heart, desires nothing.

I will go and tell them that I am ready to rid the village of their curse.

They gave her their best boat, and would have given her one of the half-grown girls to row it out for her, but Lythande declined. How could she be sure the girl was too young to have loved, and thus become vulnerable to the call of the sea-creature? Also, for safety, Lythande left her lute on the shore, partly because she wished to show them that she trusted them with it, but mostly because she feared what the damp in the boat might do to the fragile and cherished instrument. More, if it came to a fight, she might step on it or break it in the boat's crowded conditions.

It was a clear and brilliant day, and Lythande, who was physically stronger than most men, sculled the boat briskly into the strong offshore wind. Small clouds scudded along the edge of the horizon, and each breaking wave folded over and collapsed with a soft, musical splashing. The noise of the breakers was strong in her ear, and it seemed to Lythande that under the sound of the waves, there was a faraway song; like the song of a shell held to the ear. For a few minutes she sang to herself in an undertone, listening to the sound of her own voice against the voice of the sea's breaking; an illusion, she knew, but one she found pleasurable. She thought, if only she had her lute, she would enjoy improvising harmonies to this curious blending. The words she sang against the waves were nonsense syllables, but they seemed to take on an obscure and magical meaning as she sang.

She was never sure, afterward, how long this lasted. After a time, though she believed at first that it was simply another pleasant illusion like the shell held to the ear, she heard a soft voice inserting itself into the harmonies she was creating with the wave-song and her own voice; somewhere there was a third voice, wordless and incredibly sweet. Lythande went on singing, but something inside her pricked up its ears — or was it the tingling of the Blue Star that sensed the working of magic somewhere close to her?

The song, then, of the mermaid. Sweet as it was, there were no words. *As I thought, then. The creature works upon the heart's desire. I am desireless, therefore immune to the call. It cannot harm me.*

She raised her eyes. For a moment she saw only the great mass of rocks of which they had warned her, and against its mass a dark and featureless

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shadow. As she looked at the shadow, the Blue Star on her brow tingling, she willed to see more clearly. Then she saw —

What was it? Mermaid, they had said. Creature. Could they possibly call it evil?

In form, it was no more than a young girl, naked but for a necklace of small, rare, glimmering shells; the shells that had a crease running down the center, so that they looked like a woman's private parts. Her hair was dark, with the glisten of water on the smooth globes of bladder wrack lying on the sand at high tide. The face was smooth and young, with regular features. And the eyes....

Lythande could never remember anything about the eyes, though at the time she must have had some impression about the color. Perhaps they were that same color of the sea where it rolled and rippled smooth beyond the white breakers. She had no attention to spare for the eyes, for she was listening to the voice. Yet she knew she must be cautious; if she were vulnerable at all to this thing, it would be through the voice, she to whom music had been friend and lover and solace for more than a lifetime.

Now she was close enough to see. How like a young girl the mermaid looked, young and vulnerable, with a soft, childish mouth. One of the small teeth, teeth like irregular pearls, was chipped out of line, and it made her look very childish. A soft mouth. *A mouth too young for kissing,* Lythande thought, and wondered what she had meant by it.

Once I, even I was as young as that, Lythande thought, her mind straying among perilous ways of memory; a time — how many lifetimes ago? — when she had been a young girl already restless at the life of the women's quarters, dreaming of magic and adventure; a time when she had borne another name, a name she had vowed never to remember. But already, though she had not yet glimpsed the steep road that was to lead her at last to the Temple of the Blue Star and to the great renunciations that lay ahead of her as a Pilgrim-Adept, she knew her path did not lie among young girls like these — with soft, vulnerable mouths and soft, vulnerable dreams, lovers and husbands and babies clinging around their necks as the necklace of little female shells clung to the neck of the mermaid. Her world was already too wide to be narrowed so far.

Never vulnerable like that, so that this creature should call to me in the voice of a dead and beloved child....

And as if in answer, suddenly there were words in the mermaid's song, and a voice Lythande had not remembered for a lifetime. She had forgotten his face and his name; but her memory was the memory of a trained minstrel, a musician's memory. A man, a name, a life might be forgotten; a song or a voice — no, never.

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My princess and my beloved, forget these dreams of magic and adventure; together we will sing such songs of love that life need hold no more for either of us.

A swift glance at the rocks told her he sat there, the face she had forgotten, in another moment she would remember his name.... *No! This was illusion; he was dead, he had been dead for more years than she could imagine.... Go away,* she said to the illusion. *You are dead, and I am not to be deceived that way, not yet.*

They had told her the vision could call in the voice of the dead. But it could not trick her, not that way; as the illusion vanished, Lythande sensed a little ripple of laughter, like the breaking of a tiny wave against the rocks where the mermaid sat. Her laugh was delicious. Was that illusion, too?

To a woman, then, it calls in the voice of a lover. But never had Lythande been vulnerable to that call. He had not been the only one; only the one to whom Lythande had come the closest to yielding. She had almost remembered his name; for a moment her mind lingered, floating, seeking a name, a name ... then, deliberately, but almost with merriment turned her mind willfully away from the tensed fascination of the search.

She need not try to remember. That had been long, long ago, in a country so far from here that no living man within a ten-day's journey knew so much as the name of that country. So why remember? She knew the answer to that; this sea-creature, this mermaid, defended itself this way, reaching into her mind and memory, as it had reached into the mind and memory of the fishermen who sought to pass by it, losing them in a labyrinth of the past, of old loves, heart's desires. Lythande repressed a shudder, remembering the man seated by the fire, lost in his endless dream. How narrowly had she escaped that? And there would have been none to rescue her.

But a Pilgrim-Adept was not to be caught so simply. The creature was simple, using on her its only defense, forcing the mind and memory: and she had escaped. Desireless, Lythande was immune to that call of desire.

Young girl as she looked, that at least must be illusion, the mermaid was an ageless creature ... like herself, Lythande thought.

For the creature had tried for a moment to show herself to Lythande in that illusory form of a past lover —no, he had never been Lythande's lover, but in the form of an old memory to trap her in the illusory country of heart's desire. But Lythande had never been vulnerable in that way to the heart's desire.

Never?

Never, creature of dreams. Not even when I was younger than you appear now to be.

But was this the mermaid's true

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form, or something like it? The momentary illusion vanished, the mermaid had returned to the semblance of the young girl, touchingly young; there must then be some truth to the appearance of the childish mouth, the eyes that were full of dreams, the vulnerable smile. The mermaiden was protecting itself in the best way it could, for certainly a sea-maiden so frail and defenseless, seeming so young and fair, would be at the mercy of the men of the fisherfolk, men who would see only a maiden to be preyed upon.

There were many such tales along these shores, still told around the hearthfires, of mermaids and of men who had loved them. Men who had taken them home as wives, bringing a free sea-maiden to live in the smoke of the hearthfire, to cook and spin, servant to man, a mockery of the free creature she should be. Often the story ended when the imprisoned sea-maiden found her dress of fish scales and seaweed and plunged into the sea again to find her freedom, leaving the fisherman to mourn his lost love.

Or the loss of his prisoner...? In this case, Lythande's sympathy was with the mermaid.

Yet she had pledged herself to free the village of this danger. And surely it was a danger, if only of a beauty more terrible than they dared to know and understand, a fragile and fleeting beauty like the echo of a song, or like the sea wrack in the ebb and flow of the tide. For with illusion gone, the mermaid was only this frail-looking creature, ageless but with the eternal illusion of youth. We are alike, thought Lythande; in that sense, we are sisters, but I am freer than she is.

She was beginning to be aware of the mermaid's song again, and knew it was dangerous to listen. She sang to herself to try and block it away from her awareness. But she felt an enormous sympathy for the creature, here at the mercy of a crude fishing village, protecting herself as best she could, and cursed for her beauty.

She looked so like one of the young girls Lythande had known in that faraway country. They had made music together on the harp and the lute and the bamboo flute. Her name had been.... Lythande found the name in her mind without a search ... her name had been Riella, and it seemed to her that the mermaid sang in Riella's voice.

Not of love, for already at that time Lythande had known that such love as the other young girls dreamed of was not for her, but there had been an awareness between them. Never acknowledged; but Lythande had begun to know that even for a woman who cared nothing for man's desire, life need not be altogether empty. There were dreams and desires that had nothing to do with those simpler

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dreams of the other women, dreams of husband or lover or child.

And then Lythande heard the first syllable of a name, a name she had vowed to forget, a name once her own, a name she would not — no. No. A name she *could* not remember. Sweating, the Blue Star blazing with her anger, she looked at the rocks. Riella's form there wavered and was gone.

Again the creature had attempted to call to her in the voice of the dead. There was no longer the least trace of amusement in Lythande's mind. Once again she had almost fatally underestimated the sea-creature because it looked so young and childlike, because it reminded her of Riella and of the other young girls she had loved in a world, and a life, long lost to her. She would not be caught that way again. Lythande gripped the hilt of the left-hand dagger, warder against magic, as she felt the boat beneath her scrape on the rocks.

She stepped out onto the surface of the small, rocky holt, wrinkling her nose at the rankness of dead fish and sea wrack left by the tide, a carrion smell — how could so young and fair a creature live in this stench?

The mermaid said in the small voice of a very young girl, "Did they send you to kill me, Lythande?"

Lythande gripped the handle of her left-hand dagger. She had no wish to engage in conversation with the creature; she had vowed to rid the village of this thing, and rid it she would. Yet even as she raised the dagger, she hesitated.

The mermaid, still in that timid little-girl voice, said, "I admit that I tried to ensnare you. You must be a great magician to escape from me so easily. My poor magic could not hold you at all!"

Lythande said, "I am an Adept of the Blue Star."

"I do not know of the Blue Star. Yet I can feel its power," said the sea-maiden. "Your magic is very great —"

"And yours is to flatter me," said Lythande carefully, and the mermaid gave a delicious, childish giggle.

"You see what I mean? I can't deceive you at all, can I, Lythande? But why did you come here to kill me, when I can't harm you in any way? And why are you holding that horrible dagger?"

Why, indeed? Lythande wondered, and slid it back into its sheath. This creature could not hurt her. Yet surely she had come here for some reason, and she groped for it. She said at last, "The folk of the village cannot fish for their livelihood and they will all starve. Why do you want to do this?"

"Why not?" asked the mermaid innocently.

That made Lythande think a little. She had listened to the villagers and their story; she had not stopped to consider the mermaid's side of the business. The sea did not belong, after

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all, to the fishermen; it belonged to the fish and to the creatures of the sea — birds and fish and waves, shellfish of the deep, eels and dolphins and great whales who had nothing to do with humankind at all — and, yes, to the mermaids and stranger sea creatures as well.

Yet Lythande was vowed to fight on the side of Law against Chaos till the Final Battle should come. And if humankind could not get its living as did the other creatures inhabiting the world, what would become of them?

"Why should they live by killing the fish in the sea?" the mermaid asked. "Have they any better right to survive than the fish?"

That was a question not all that easily answered. Yet as she glanced about the shore, smelling the rankness of the tide, Lythande knew what she should say next.

"You live upon the fish, do you not? There are enough fish in the sea for all the people of the shore, as well as for your kind. And if the fishermen do not kill the fish and eat them, the fish will only be eaten by other fish. Why not leave the fisherfolk in peace, to take what they need?"

"Well, perhaps I will," said the mermaid, giggling again, so that Lythande was again astonished; what a childish creature this was, after all. Did she even know what harm she had done?

"Perhaps I can find another place to go. Perhaps you could help me?" She raised her large and luminous eyes to Lythande. "I heard you singing. Do you know any new songs, magician? And will you sing them to me?"

Why, the poor creature is like a child; lonely, and even restless, all alone here on the rocks. How like a child she was when she said it.... Do you know any new songs? Lythande wished for a moment that she had not left her lute on the shore.

"Do you want me to sing to you?"

"I heard you singing, and it sounded so sweet across the water, my sister. I am sure we have songs and magics to teach one another."

Lythande said gently, "I will sing to you."

First she sang, letting her mind stray in the mists of time past, a song she had sung to the sound of the bamboo reed-flute, more than a lifetime ago. It seemed for a moment that Riella sat beside her on the rocks. Only an illusion created by the mermaid, of course. But surely a harmless one! Still, perhaps it was not wise to allow the illusion to continue; Lythande wrenched her mind from the past, and sang the sea-song that she had composed yesterday, as she walked along the shore to this village.

"Beautiful, my sister," murmured the mermaid, smiling so that the charming little gap in her pearly teeth showed. "Such a musician I have never heard. Do all the people who live

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on land sing so beautifully?"

"Very few of them," said Lythande. "Not for many years have I heard such sweet music as yours."

"Sing again, Sister," said the mermaid, smiling. "Come close to me and sing again. And then I shall sing to you."

"And you will come away and let the fisherfolk live in peace?" Lythande asked craftily.

"Of course I will, if you ask it, Sister," the mermaid said. It had been so many years since anyone had spoken to Lythande, woman to woman, without fear. It was death for her to allow any man to know that she was a woman; and the women in whom she dared confide were so few. It was soothing balm to her heart.

Why, after all, should she go back to the land again? Why not stay here in the quiet peace of the sea, sharing songs and magical spells with her sister, the mermaid? There were greater magics here than she had ever known, yes, and sweeter music, too.

She sang, hearing her voice ring out across the water. The mermaid sat quietly, her head a little turned to the side, listening as if in utter enchantment, and Lythande felt she had never sung so sweetly. For a moment she wondered if, hearing her song echoing from the ocean, any passerby would think that he heard the true song of a mermaid. For surely she, too, Lythande, could enchant with her song. Should she stay here, cease denying her true sex, where she could be at once woman and magician and minstrel? She, too, could sit on the rocks, enchanting with her music, letting time and sea roll over her, forgetting the struggle of her life as Pilgrim-Adept, being only what she was in herself. She was a great magician; she could feel the very tingle of her magic in the Blue Star on her brow, crackling lightnings....

"Come nearer to me, Sister, that I can hear the sweetness of your song," murmured the mermaid. "Truly, it is you who have enchanted me, magician —"

As if in a dream, Lythande took a step farther up the beach. A shell crunched hard under her foot. Or was it a bone? She never knew what made her look down, to see that her foot had turned on a skull.

Lythande felt ice run through her veins. This was no illusion. Quickly she gripped the left-hand dagger and whispered a spell that would clear the air of illusion and void all magic, including her own. She should have done it before.

The mermaid gave a despairing cry. "No, no, my sister, my sister musician, stay with me ... now you will hate me too...." But even as the words died out, like the fading sound of a lute's broken string, the mermaid was gone, and Lythande stared in horror at what sat on the rocks.

It was not remotely human in form. It was three or four times the size of

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the largest sea-beast she had ever seen, crouching huge and greenish, the color of seaweed and sea wrack. All she could see of the head was rows and rows of teeth, huge teeth gaping before her. And the true horror was that one of the great fangs had a chip knocked from it.

Little pearly teeth with a little chip....

Gods of Chaos! I almost walked down that thing's throat!"

Retching, Lythande swung the dagger; almost at once she whipped out the right-hand knife, which was effective against material menace; struck toward the heart of the thing. An eerie howl went up as blackish green blood, smelling of sea wrack and carrion, spurted over the Pilgrim-Adept. Lythande, shuddering, struck again and again until the cries were silent. She looked down at the dead thing, the rows of teeth, the tentacles and squirming suckers. Before her eyes was a childish face, a voice whose memory would never leave her.

And I called the thing "Sister"....

It had even been easy to kill. It had no weapons, no defenses except its song and its illusions. Lythande had been so proud of her ability to escape the illusions, proud that she was not vulnerable to the call of lover or of memory.

Yet it had called, after all, to the heart's desire ... for music. For magic. For the illusion of a moment where

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something that never existed, never could exist, had called her "Sister," speaking to a womanhood renounced forever. She looked at the dead thing on the beach, and knew she was weeping as she had not wept for three ordinary lifetimes.

The mermaid had called her "Sister," and she had liked it.

She told herself, even as her body shook with sobs, that her tears were mad. If she had not killed it, she would have died in those great and dreadful rows of teeth, and it would not have been a pleasant death.

Yet for that illusion, I would have been ready to die....

She was crying for something that had never existed.

She was crying *because* it had never existed, and because, for her, it would never exist, not even in memory. After a long time, she stooped down and, from the mass that was melting like decaying seaweed, she picked up a fang with a chip out of it. She stood looking at it for a long time. Then, her lips tightening grimly, she flung it out to sea, and clambered back into the boat. As she sculled back to shore, she found she was listening to the sound in the waves, like a shell held to the ear. And when she realized that she was listening again for another voice, she began to sing the rowdiest drinking song she knew.

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Installment 12: *In Which Several Things Are Held Up To The Light . . . Not A Brain In Sight*

I don't know about you, but as a film critic I view the onset of summertime with an almost Kierkegaardian fear and trembling, a sickness unto death. While *you* stretch with yearning toward rubicund visions of two weeks in the Poconos or sipping a Pimm's Cup on the verandah of the Hotel Aswan Oberoi, overlooking Elephantine Island in the middle of the Nile, *I* contemplate being dragged twitching and foaming into screening theaters where I must, perforce, view this year's pukeload of "vacation films." Films, that is, conceived and executed to a warped perception of that demographic wedge of American humanity known as "the teen-age audience."

As through a glans dorkly, the demented entrepreneurs who rain down summer plagues of *Porkys, Friday the 13th's* and *Stayin' Alives,* see that wedge of the wad as follows:

From out of the shadows of the parking lot shamble a boy and a girl, mid-teens, savaging gobbets of Bubblicious like brachiosaurii masticating palmetto fronds, their hirsute knuckles brushing the Tarmac as they shuffle, blank-eyed, toward the lights of the Cineplex. Hanging from the boy's belt is a skin-pouch of goodies to be consumed during the film: Jujubes, chicken heads, balls formed of

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the soft center of slices of Wonder Bread soaked in carmelized sugar and suet, blood sausage and M&M peanut chocolate candies. The girl's bare left breast bears a tattoo portrait of Tom Cruise in his Jockey shorts. They pause for a moment before entering the theater to drool and smack their paws together at the sight of a ratpack of *vatos locos* stomping and disemboweling a 76-year-old Gold Star mother in a wheelchair, beset while trundling home from the supermarket with her dinner cans of Alpo, purchased in exchange for the entirety of her Social Security check and a quart of plasma. They steal her bedroom slippers as the *pachucos* run off, and they enter the theater. To be enriched intellectually. The film is *Rambo: First Blood Part II.*

No sooner does the bell ring through the halls and classrooms of Charles Manson High School, signaling the disengorgement of post-pubescent fans of John Landis and Joe Dante films, than the film industry unleashes its locust swarm of summertime idiocies. Each film kissed on its flaccid lips by studio shamans, and sent aloft bearing the multi-million-dollar boxoffice dreams of execs before whose eyes dance the revenue figures of *Beverly Hills Cop.*

But hark!

What is this we see? Only into June (as I write this), the ticket sales for the big summer films are off, way off, terrifyingly off. In the first week of the Summer Push, revenues fell off by 13% from last year's bonanza; second week, the drop was by 27%; and this week the bottom made bye-bye . . . a 35% drop.

What in the world can this mean?

Is it possible that the malformed image of the youth audience heretofore nuzzled by the industry is a chimera? Has it dawned on (what Robert Blake calls) The Suits that there is strong evidence to support the belief that not all kids are slope-browed, prognathic vermin lusting after cheap thrills and rivers of blood? Have we a hope that The Suits noticed huge teen audiences patronizing *Wargames* year before last, and *Amadeus* last year (neither of which, by any stretch, is monkey-movie)? Is this heart-stopping statistic the clarion call of a small revolution? Can The Suits extrapolate the success with kids of these two exemplary and intelligent motion pictures — albeit containing youth-resonant elements — into commercial realms where the movies serve the dual purpose of entertaining *and* uplifting the dear little tots?

One can only hope. Two can only hope. That's you and me, kid. But if either of us expect the barricades to be manned *this* year, color us premature. For, like the brachiosaurus, the industry has its brain located somewhere down at the root of its tail . . . and is slow slow slow to react. Maybe next year.

But *this* year, as summer lazes to-

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ward us, I would fain regale you with views of four films created to honor the conceit that the youth audience has a limitless appetite for gore, counterfeit emotion, macho patriotism, repetition of formulaic plots and, on sum, movies best identified as *empty-headed.*

RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II (Tri-Star) and A VIEW TO A KILL (MGM/UA) may seem peculiar choices for consideration in a critique supposedly dealing with fantasy and science fiction films; at first they may seem so. Nor will I dodge the issue with an imperious wave of my hand and the magisterial utterance that I'll review what I damned well please and if you don't like it you can go squat on a taco. No, I will treat you as equals (though I'd hope you want better for yourselves) by pointing out that both of these films defy even the most minimal judgment of what is "reality" by offering us stories and characters who are *clearly* fantasy constructs. These are films of purest phantasm, no matter *how* they're marketed; and thus become fair game for our scrutiny in the context of this essay.

Or if you'd prefer, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." (*The Merchant of Venice*; Act I, Scene iii.)

Sporting a title as graceful as a hyena with a shattered spine dragging itself to a waterhole, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* proffers despicable manipulation and revisionist history in place of serious consideration of America's reaction (even more than a decade after we got the shit kicked out of us) to the Vietnam War. We are sucked into 92 minutes of nonstop emptyheaded violence through the use of a greased icon known as John Rambo — ex-vet, sullen and *angst*-ridden survivor not only of a war "we didn't really want to win" but of the (real or imagined) disdain of a nation that "refuses to honor those of us who died for you."

As if you didn't know, Sylvester Stallone is Rambo. Or more precisely, Rambo is Rocky. Mike Hodel suggests that this is a film about revenge, and they might as well have staged it as a P.S. to the Napoleonic Wars if they thought Stallone would look good in tights. He's correct, of course. Thematically, it's the *Death Wish* genre, cast in jungle combat. But. . .

It's one hundred and seventy years since the Napoleonic Wars, and only twelve since the Nam. We don't ache in every tendon from the former as we do from the latter. So screw it as regards thematic rationalization. What we have to deal with here is pure fantasy twisted to the service of implanting and/or ripening a hateful, destructive Newspeak. Rambo is as real as Conan; and intellectually, I'd venture to say, the barbarian swordsman could spot Rambo three pawns and a rook, and still whip the vet with the Schoolboy Gambit.

In the previous Rambo film, based

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on a strong novel by David Morrell, the cranky Viet-vet is arrested for chickenshit reasons in a small town, escapes, lays out half the police department, is hunted through nearby woods and hills, demolishes state troopers, posse commitatus, and National Guardsmen utilizing guerrilla tactics he employed as the most fearsome weapon of Special Forces in Southeast Asia, and finally lays waste to the hamlet itself. Brought to book for his rampage, Rambo (get the suggestion of assonance — *ram*bo/*ram*page?)* is talked down from the summit of his destructive fever by his former boss in Special Services, the always-watchable Richard Crenna.

In this second chapter of the Rambo Saga — which now has made so much money that there will *fer shure* be a *Rambo III* — this contemporary Myrmidon is in prison, making little ones out of big ones. He gets sprung by Crenna to tackle a one-man mission the purpose of which is to take photos of a Viet Cong prison camp (from which Rambo escaped during the War) in order to discern if they're holding GI POW's. He is strictly forbidden from attempting rescue of any such personnel, which naturally grinds Rambo's gears, and is offered to us as an allegory for America's alleged refusal to "go all the way" in Viet Nam.

Of course, there's a plot twist here — story by Kevin Jarre and screenplay by the omnipresent Stallone in collaboration with James Cameron of *The Terminator* fame — that sends Rambo off on yet another quotidian binge of mayhem during which he wipes out what appears to be half the population of the area. And this is what makes up the bulk of the film: free-fire zone elevated to the status of *chanson de geste*. Yankee pluck winning, in small, what it lost in large.

And in the process Rambo is submitted for our emptyheaded adoration as a fantasy construct. Stallone — photographed by director George P. Cosmatos (whom I encountered many years ago as Georgios Pan Cosmatos) all sweat-slick and pumped up to produce a creature both tumescent and iconic, a thing not-quite-and more-than-human, a poster-ready hunk guaranteed to create masturbatory longings in leather gays and feverish schoolgirls alike — is held center frame virtually every moment, the camera panning in sensual closeup across every last convex surface of deltoid, tricep and trapezius, not to mention the ever-popular latissimus dorsi. Like something fallen off a pedestal in Thrace, Rambo surges, boils,

Silverberg suggests, in a display of lexicological wordplay worthy of Phil Farmer, that this assonance is only marginally likely, while it strikes him as possible that Morrell gave his vengeful fury the name Rambo *as a homophone for* Rimbaud, *who was also a wild and crazy guy. This way lies madness.*

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say rather *ejaculates* through this warrior-fantasy, glowing with Vaseline-lined pectorals, as one with The Lone Ranger, Superman or the cinema image of Bruce Lee; the National Rifle Association's own *Übermensch*; the wet dream of every king-cab-riding, deer-hunting, longing-to-be-macho American redneck, slugging away brew after brew at the drive-in, pounding the steering wheel and screaming himself hoarse as Zorro Rambo wipes away his country's shame at having picked a fight it couldn't win, against a tiny adversary, that left names like William Calley to haunt us on Veterans' Day.

A proper fantasy for examination here, Rambo walks through fussillades of machine gun fire, belts of bullets wrapped around his forearm, impossibly firing something that looks like an M60E1 machine-gun with one hand; and he sustains, if I recall correctly, one minor flesh wound. Never does the weapon track up and to the right, as such ordnance is wont to do, defoliating every rubber tree and banyan in the vicinity. Never does the barrel seize up when overheated by Stallone's visually dramatic but utterly fanciful long bursts. Never do the massed volleys of heavy and light armament fire touch this impossible avenger, not even at point-blank range. But Rambo cleans clocks on every side, blowing the little yellow men into the water and through hooch walls as if they were springloaded.

One wonders — if one wonders at all — if one isn't emptyheaded — how we managed to *lose* a war to these inept gooks or slopes or dinks or whatever the hell we're supposed to call Third World Peoples Arrayed Against Us: they can't hit a bull in the ass with a scoop-shovel, but our Sylvester needn't even aim to take out two or three of them with each round. Sort of the way John Wayne and Gene Autry used to snap off a shot over the shoulder from a galloping horse, and three firewater-crazed Comanches would tumble off their mounts, dragging the horses with them. (One wonders why we never beat the Seminoles. Hell, they didn't even have horses. Used to ride alligators, as I understand it.)

But this is all part of the fantasy.

As unreal as *Starman* or *The Thing* (remake version), and no less a misuse of the fantasy idiom for dubious ends.

Ramboe Etc. is making megabucks this summer, and it is an example of emptyheadedness difficult to deny. I admit to being swept up in the breakneck action, no nobler than the drive-in dolt whose camper bears the bumper sticker

MY WIFE YES
MY DOG MAYBE
MY GUN NEVER

and who will certainly go for the twisted "philosophy" that the only thing Rambo wants for himself, after rescuing the POW's and shooting

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down a latest-model Russian gunship, is that "America love us as much as we love America." I admit to the visceral punch of clever filmmaking, and I warn you that it is all artifice, as manipulative as *Rocky* and as slick as a De Palma knife-kill flick . . . and as detestable. It is, of course, these smoothyguts versions of otherwise-dismissible genre films, no more important than cartoons, conjured to go through us like *merde* through a merganser, wherein lies the danger. Emptyhead is as emptyhead does. Unthinking, all receptor and no intellect, we sit unprotected before the tsunami of counterfeit emotion, turned into empty vessels waiting to be filled by cheap bravado, bathos and sonic stimuli, becoming mere stipules for the walking vegetation of a vengeance parable.

That it is a man-eating plant never seems to occur to the brew-swillers or the teen-age shamblers. But then, isn't that the essence of emptyheadedness?

Nowhere nearly as vile as *Rambo Etc.* but even more emptyheaded is the latest James Bond film, what I wearily perceive to be the eleven hundredth film in the endless series. (When the human race goes to the stars, there will surely be only three things of sufficient obstinacy-of-existence, from all that our species has produced, that will go with us: the little plastic beads that fall out of UPS packages no matter how you struggle to contain them; James Bond films; and Swedish meatballs.)

The menace this time is an uncomfortable-looking Christopher Walken, who should have known better. Oddjob this time is rock singer Grace Jones, who looks incredible (and has always, it seems to me, looked a lot better than she sings), but who ain't even a close second for deadliness to the late Lotte Lenya as SMERSH's liquidator, Rosa Klebb, in *From Russia, With Love.* And as the nubbin from which the film grows is a minor Ian Fleming short story originally published in *Playboy* (under the more grammatical title "From a View to a Kill"), what passes for plot is the now-hoary Bond jiggery-pokery, with gags no more innovative or memorable than those to be found in the last half dozen. This film is pure Grub Street (look up the reference), and the very model of brainless. Running, jumping and standing still, with Roger Moore looking more exhausted and threadbare than ever before. It's a shame, really. Moore seems a right decent chap when he's being interviewed; takes it all with the proper modicum of unselfconscious parody; very little of the Colonel Blimp about him; the sort of elegant gentleman one would like to invite over for an evening of billiards and Mexican coat-epec. And if you never saw him in a little adventure film called *ffolkes*, you might continue to believe, incor-

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rectly, that he can't act with any depth of emotion.

But Bond goes on and on, yet another fantasy superman, nattier (god knows) than Rambo, and quarts less oily; but no more a part of the mimetic universe than Tarzan, Conan or Sir Launcelot. Emptyheaded filmmaking long-since canonized and as exquisite an example of how preserved like a fly in amber these things become when they hit the rut of formula.

I go to them on the Everest Principle: "because it's there." But I blush to tell you I fell asleep three times.

And I've saved the remaining pair of emptyheaded summer films with which you'll be tempted for last, because I have some small personal stake in them. And because I don't think they deserve to be savaged as *Rambo Etc.* demanded.

The first is THE BLACK CAULDRON (Walt Disney) and I'm saddened to have to report that it is utterly and completely emptyheaded. The tip-off, I guess, is that nowhere in the credits will one find a listing for an author. More than ten years in the making, at a cost of more than twenty-five million dollars, and described by its producer as "the most ambitious animated production since *Pinocchio*," this is the 25th full-length animated feature from the Disney Studios; and it is a waste of time.

Pre-screening scuttlebutt had it that the animation techniques were the most extraordinary since the heyday of the Nine Old Men who worked with Walt on *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia.* Scuttlebutt had it that since the leavetaking of Don Bluth and his cohorts, and the deaths or retirements of the remaining Old Men, it had become necessary for the new crew of young turk animators to rediscover the old tricks or invent new ones equally as impressive. That was the scuttlebutt and if, like me, you got wind of such rumors and, like me, you hitched you hopes to that sticking-place, you will be dismayed beyond the containing of such pain. I left the studio screening with a leaden heart. Jessie and Howard Green suggest I was revved too high. That there was no way my expectations could have been honored.

Well, maybe. Who knows?

All I *do* know is that I enjoyed the Chronicles of Prydain fantasies by Lloyd Alexander on which the film is based . . . but in no way slavishly or with that fan elitism that contends *no* film can top the original material; I was wide open to be dazzled or merely pleasantly entertained, whichever; I am not a recidivist who believes the best work of Disney is past and can never be topped.

And even so, I was bored.

It's not a bad film, it's merely a bore. There is nothing new here. The usual funny sidekick (but Gurgi isn't Dopey or Jiminy Cricket), the usual

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unisex hero and heroine (but Taran and Eilonwy aren't Prince Phillip or Cinderella), the usual pure-black villain (but the Horned King, for all his death's head and sepulchral wailing could never be, on the most evil day of his life, Queen Grimhelde the Wicked Witch or even Stromboli).

It is a flat film, and I think it is so flat because it was apparently not scripted. Illustrators went from scene to scene and the movie reflects that episodic method. Momentous events turn out to be passing fancies, magical implements are introduced and then are discarded as if all the hue and cry about them had been intended merely to rope you in, characters pop up and never pay off, and the clear intention of the producers to return to some small degree of the genuine fright we felt at the perils passim the first Disney classics is simply not realized.

I nodded off twice.

This seeming recurrence of filmic narcolepsy on my part disturbs me. Yes, I've been working hard, but who the hell falls asleep in either a Disney film or a James Bond adventure? I'll tell you who. Someone who loves movies and wants to be thrilled.

So it is with considerable joylessness that I report *The Black Cauldron* is empty, and the film is empty-headed.

Which brings me at the final outpost to Stephen King's new film, SILVER BULLET (Paramount). Based on Steve's *Cycle of the Werewolf*, with screenplay by Steve, directed by newcomer Daniel Attias, and produced by a charming and intelligent woman named Martha Schumacher, this is, I fear, one more in the litany of misses made from King product. Not as bad as *Cujo* or *Children of the Corn* or *Christine*, but as emptyheaded as any of the films I've reviewed this time, *Silver Bullet* hasn't much to recommend it save a few nice insights by Steve, two extraordinary performances by a young woman named Megan Follows and a little boy named Corey Haim, who play brother and sister, and a scene in a foggy forest that is cinematically enthralling.

Beyond those minor joys, this is simply another feast of ghast in which heads are ripped from necks, vigilantes get half their faces clawed off, and a young woman is disemboweled. The story is pretty traditional, nothing much innovative after you've seen *The Werewolf of London* or the original Lon Chaney, Jr. classic. The attempts at resonance with *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be credited to Steve, who knows what quality is, but laid into such a stock plot, they are likely to be lost on the sort of audience for which the film is intended.

A word about that audience. I saw this film at a special pre-release screening at Paramount. Steve was in town and was kind enough to invite me to see it with him. As we sat in the

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back of the theater on the lot, the seats filled by a carefully selected, demographically-perfect crowd of young people — I'd say between seventeen and twenty-five years old — Steve expressed mild surprise that the audience applauded the scenes of strongest violence. I was not surprised. I saw *The Omen* with just such an audience, and I know how they love their blood sports. Steve knows that, too. Maybe sometime soon I'll tell you about an encounter I had with kids at Central Juvenile Hall in L.A. that speaks to this phenomenon. But not right now. It's bad enough that I'm rewarding Steve's and Dino's courtesy with a negative review. Suffice to say, this film will no doubt make money, but it is emptyheaded summer fare, with a soundtrack of the sort that Tara used to call "rats digging their way to China" music.

As for this season's Spielberg offering, well, last year I warned you away from *Gremlins* and those of you who heeded my gardyloo later thanked me. Some of you who sneered at my vehement contempt shelled out your shekels, laid out your lira, plonked down your pennies, abused your eyeballs, and later wrote me toe-scuffling, red-faced, abnegating appeals for absolution. This year, on the basis of utter emptyheadedness and a soundtrack mix that renders every line of dialogue to spinach, I warn you off *The Goonies*, which I will not mention again. Perhaps you will take a word to the wise this time. If not, well, *caveat emptor* and don't come crying to me. (The superlative *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* is being rereleased, however, and you're better served spending your hard-earned to see that Spielbergian wonder this summer.)

And so that you don't think I'm merely a cranky old fuck who is determined to follow in the footsteps of, say, John Simon, let me urge you to rush out immediately to see *Ladyhawke* and *Cocoon*, both of which are fresh and dear and worth the laying out of pfennig.

Also, ignore all negative reviews of *Return to Oz*, which I *will* review at length. Ignore Siskal and Ebert of ABC's *At the Movies*; ignore Robert Denerstein of the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver and Robert Osborne of *The Hollywood Reporter* and KTTV; ignore my friends Leonard Maltin of *Entertainment Tonight* and David Sheehan of ABC-TV; ignore Jeffrey Lyons and Neal Gabler of PBs's *Sneak Previews*, and Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*. Shine 'em on, ever last one of them. They are wrong, wrong, wrong in their looney denigrations. *Return to Oz* is smashing! For those of us who are familiar with the Oz canon of L. Frank Baum and those who lovingly continued the history of that special wonderland — even though we adore the 1939 MGM classic, watch it again and

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Fred Saberhagen's new story is about a most surprising — and most logical — evolutionary leap. His latest book is BERSERKER THRONE (Fireside Books), an addition to the famous Berserker series.

As Duly Authorized

BY
FRED SABERHAGEN

The truth of our late twenty-first-century lives is contained in our documents, our filmed and magnetized records. Or so we believe. Therefore, not only my own life but the foundation of all our lives is now at stake. For the sake of our whole world's survival, it is vital that this statement of mine be credited, that appropriate action — in this case, an investigation of the monstrous child Martin Mandell — be taken without delay by those authorized to do so.

It was this child, Martin Mandell, who on a day some three weeks ago began the chain of events that has brought me to my present unhappy situation. I was then, and had been for about two years, assigned to the Bureau of Science, Department of Paleontology, Fairbanks Office. My duties were of course administrative, and commensurate with my rank; nearly a score of clerks and aides worked under my direction.

That never-to-be-forgotten day began like any other, and continued so until midafternoon. At that time I was slightly irritated to notice that my then secretary, Ms. Lorraine Mandell (the child's widowed mother), had already spent several minutes of working time in the corridor outside my office, engaged in a personal conversation with the technician, Antonelli.

Antonelli had paused for this discussion while transporting through the corridor a paleontological fieldwork robot. While the technician allowed his attention to be distracted from his duties regarding this device, the Mandell child approached down the corridor. It was the child's custom, despite my continued efforts to discourage the practice, to pass the

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office each day on his way home from school, and from the corridor distract his mother at least momentarily from her duties.

Today most of the width of the corridor was occupied by the fieldwork robot, standing waiting while Antonelli chatted. Whether from sheer idle curiosity, or from some yet baser motive, young Mandell was attracted to the controls of the machine. Before anyone was aware of the danger, it had begun to labor, and before Antonelli could regain control of the device, it had bored sizable openings — several centimeters in diameter — in both sides of the corridor, in completely unauthorized locations.

Since one of these openings pierced the external wall of the building complex, and the other, almost directly opposite, breached the window between my office and the corridor, my staff and I were at once engulfed in a rush of raw outside air. In passing, I may remark that the technician's lapse and the boy's mischief — if it was no more than mischief — would certainly have had a much severer effect had the incident occurred during the winter months. Since we here in Alaska are, as you probably know, in the high northern latitudes, a direct opening of the building in January, say, would have admitted a volume of air at such low temperatures as to be immediately dangerous to health — air perhaps accompanied by frozen precipitation, all forms of which I am sure are highly unpleasant.

Too late, Lorraine seized upon her son, who began to howl. He is, I suppose six or eight years of age, and of what I should call nondescript appearance, save for the small permanent vertical crease in his forehead that gives to his face the expression of a habitual frown. I gave Lorraine leave to remove the child to home or playground or wherever he should have been at that time of day; and then I turned to Antonelli.

"Nobody's hurt, thank God, nobody's hurt," was all that he could find to say at first.

"Fortunately for you," I replied. From the bookcase beside my desk, I brushed fine fragments of window glass, and pulled out Volume I of the Emergency Reporting Procedures, which I keep available at all times in nonelectronic form, to be prepared for power failures. I weighed the book significantly in my hand, and opened it. "However, if memory serves me correctly — yes, here is the appropriate section — even when no personal injury is involved, there are seventeen separate reports to be filled out following an accident of this type involving the destruction of property. You are undoubtedly the one responsible. The reports are to be completed at once, before you resume your normal duties."

"Seventeen," he mumbled, shocked. He looked at his watch. "Sir, I am

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responsible. I'll pay for the damage—"

"Of course!"

"But right now I *can't* sit down and make out seventeen forms. Some must be long ones? Naturally. You see, I *have* to get this robot out to the diggings in just an hour. We're short of techs, and there's no one else I can ask to handle it. I accept responsibility for what happened; if we can just let some of these reports go until I hurry back —"

"That is quite impossible. The World Office Regulations are very clear on the procedure to be followed."

"Maybe you don't understand, sir, but it's *vital* for me to get out there inside of an hour. If I miss this digging today, maybe even my whole future career will be shot. I was just telling Lorraine here about this one opening in Scientist Grade One —"

Although I had given Lorraine leave to remove her child, she was still hovering nearby. Her arms were about her son, who clung to her. I recall now — and now shudder at the possible significance of the fact — that he was chewing like an infant on some small, already half-demolished plastic toy, while his eyes stared up at me from under his frowning forehead.

His mother's eyes were also fixed on mine, and they held a pleading expression I had not seen in them before. "Oh, really, it was my fault. Marty's my responsibility. Tony here isn't to blame."

"In this case, Lorraine," I said to her, "your sympathy is misplaced. Please remove the child to wherever his proper location at this hour may be."

After another moment she nodded reluctantly, and turned away with her offspring.

I then, with a sigh, turned back to face Antonelli, and my unpleasant task of seeing to it that the culprit complied with regulations. I regretted that the danger to the technician's future career was probably real. In the Bureau of Science, many of even the higher positions of authority are filled by persons known more for their technical ability than their administrative competence, so that his hope for advancement was not altogether illusory. It is also true that in the Department of Paleontology's circumpolar operations, due to the shortness of the annual period of summer weather and thawed-out soil, operational schedules are frequently rigid and the junior worker who misses his chance for fieldwork on one day may not be granted another chance on the next. These operational difficulties, and the need for haste arising therefrom, are used by some to justify all manner of procedural irregularities.

Irregularity had never been the rule in my office. The regulations on reporting accidents were perfectly clear, and I was of course prepared to call the police, if need be, to enforce

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them. I made sure that Antonelli was aware of this fact. As there was then nothing else that he could do, he seated himself at Lorraine's desk. Helpfully I placed a microwriter, several rolls of blank magnetic film, and the book of Emergency Reporting Procedures, containing blanks of all the necessary forms, before him. He opened the volume with an air of hopelessness, but soon he raised his fingers to the keyboard of the microwriter and began furiously to type. I remember feeling a pang of sympathy for him, as it was manifestly impossible that the most skilled clerk should be able to the complete the seventeen forms in less than half a day.

It had become apparent to my olfactory sense that some spicelike pollen or similar substance was entering the room from outside, through the holes in wall and window, but I still had duties to perform. Cautioning my staff against unnecessary deep breathing of this unauthorized air, I returned to my own desk, and on my personal microwriter began the reports that would be required of me as senior administrator at the scene of the accident.

This had occupied me for some twenty minutes when, raising my head, I saw that Lorraine had returned to the office. (Her apartment on the residential level was only a minute's walk away.) She was standing now beside her own desk, at which Antonelli was still seated, and speaking earnestly to him. As I watched, she nervously — and, as I thought, furtively — placed her right hand briefly in his. The manner in which this was done suggested to me very strongly that she had secretly given him some small object, or objects. I gave no sign of having observed anything out of the ordinary. I waited, and as may well be imagined, I wondered.

Lorraine, though her desk had been preempted, attempted to resume some of her normal duties about the office. She also coordinated the efforts of the maintenance engineer who had at last arrived to sweep up the debris of the accident, and who on the completion of my written request arranged temporary coverings for the holes.

Scarcely a minute after she had passed some object to him, Antonelli hurried over to me. "Sir, here are the reports you need." He gave the impression of a man almost strangling with relief. "If there's anything else, I'll be back as soon as I can." He bolted from the office, and an instant later I heard the heavy, soft treads of the robot moving away.

With a heavy heart, I slid the film Antonelli had given me into my viewer. To my amazement, it held what appeared to be a sequence of seventeen genuine accident reports, each differing from the others in detail, all of them acceptably filled out. Each described the accident as it had taken place — including the serial numbers of the equipment involved; the

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contractors and all subcontractors for both the robot and the building; and, where necessary, such appropriate background material as Antonelli's family history, etc.

For a minute or two, I sat staring into the viewer. Of course the film could not have been honestly produced in twenty minutes. I looked toward Lorraine, but she was avoiding my eye. Sadly, I allowed myself to be almost completely convinced that she was implicated in the loathsome crime of computerized forgery, evidently involving some totally unauthorized tap-in on, and time-theft from, some computer of awesome capability.

How could I have imagined then that the truth involved an evil even more monstrous — one that might threaten the foundations of our civilization?

Even though the true horror of the situation had not yet dawned upon me, still, as Lorraine's superior, I naturally felt some concern and responsibility toward her. Damning as the evidence of computer crime appeared to me to be, I still wanted to give her every benefit of the doubt before initiating a formal investigation. It was this concern that caused me to take measures to overhear her conversation that evening with Antonelli in the local dining room.

That evening I went alone as usual to dine. Looking about the large room before choosing a table, I noticed my secretary and the technician in animated conversation at a somewhat isolated table located beside an artificial waterfall and its decorative shrubbery. Making a circuitous approach so they would remain unaware of my nearness, I chose for myself a table separated from theirs only by the dense foliage of the shrubs. The waterfall masked other sounds. I drew from my pocket my small listening aid, a valuable tool I carried for the purpose of evaluation of subordinates in the office, and unobtrusively focused it in their direction.

To my surprise, Lorraine was questioning the would-be scientist about evolution, mutation, and related subjects. I recorded much of the conversation and replayed it alone in my study later that night, so it is fixed quite firmly in my memory.

Antonelli, in the expansive manner of a fool in the advanced stages of infatuation, was eager to display his knowledge by giving extensive answers to Lorraine's questions. Her particular interest seemed to be in what I understand is now called punctuationalism, the field of knowledge concerning sudden evolutionary change.

Antonelli spoke to her of the bat and of the whale, both appearing suddenly in early Tertiary times, both in their earliest known forms already fully adapted for their highly special-

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ized modes of life. He mentioned *Arsinoitherium,* the strange ungulate of Oligocene Egypt that seems to be totally without immediate ancestors or descendants of any kind. He waxed excited over the peppered moth, a species saved from extinction by a black mutation coming at just the right time to preserve its camouflage, when the surfaces of its city environment were being darkened by the fumes of the Industrial Revolution.

I recall now with special clarity one other sentence from his lecture: "The theory seems to be firmly established now, that since the arrival of *Homo sapiens* on the scene, evolutionary pressure has dropped off in the other species. The torch seems to be ours to bear."

"Ahh," breathed Lorraine, leaning back in her chair, so that now I could glimpse her face between branches of shrubbery. Antonelli's last remark seemed to have struck her with peculiar force.

He soon began a clumsy attempt to woo her. She, who had evaded my own least attempts at friendliness, did not laugh at the technician, or coldly rebuff him at once, as a day earlier I should have thought inevitable. Instead, a thoughtful silence ensued, followed by these words in Lorraine's voice: "Tony, before I can let myself get serious about any man, I have to be very sure about him. I'm in a special situation, with Marty. You can't understand it yet."

"Sure I can. The kid needs a father."

"Oh, I know. But there's more to it than that — in Marty's case. There are strains.... Marty's father was under great emotional stress when he died in that accident."

"Well, I'm sure that wasn't your fault, and it wasn't the kid's. Now was it?"

"No."

"So, the little guy flipped a switch on my machine. You got me out of trouble — I won't ask how you managed to produce those films. But kids do things like that. It doesn't mean he's a monster or anything."

There was a silence. Lorraine had leaned forward again, and I could no longer see her face. Then Antonelli's voice again: "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm all right."

"Listen, Lorraine, whatever troubles you've got, I want you to know you can trust me and tell me about 'em."

"I want to believe that, Tony."

And there was silence again, lasting for a considerable time.

As I sat there, I realized fully how extravagant were the fancies with which I had lately beguiled some of my leisure moments — daydreams that had involved Lorraine. Before the revelations of that day, I had sometimes even imagined the two of us obtaining and processing bethroth-

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al and marriage contracts. I had envisioned her name beside mine in the spaces of those forms.

I now saw clearly, I say, how foolish such fancies were. Yet there remained to me my duty as Lorraine's superior to do what I could for her in the way of ethical and legal counseling. Concern for her son was also in my thoughts; I considered that forgery and loose romantic dalliance formed an unsuitable environment for a child's proper development.

I kept my own counsel until the close of office hours on the next day. Then I calmly stated to Lorraine that with her permission, I intended to call upon her in her home that evening. There were, I told her, certain matters of the greatest importance that I felt we must privately discuss without delay.

An unmistakable expression of guilty fear appeared in her eyes. But she did not dare refuse so reasonable a request.

When I presented myself that evening at the door of Lorraine's apartment, she admitted me readily enough. She was attempting to conceal her guilty fear, but to my eyes it was still evident.

"We are alone?" I asked.

"Yes. I've sent Marty next door for a while. What is it that you want?"

After giving her to understand that she lay under a cloud of the gravest suspicions of computerized forgery, I tried to discuss with her in a paternal way what course of action she might honorably take to extricate herself.

She deliberately misunderstood my motives, and declaimed: "How could I ever have thought you were a friend?"

"You had better allow me to be your friend, Lorraine. Considering your unfortunate situation at present, you would be wise to accept the counsel of a man of acknowledged judgment and influence. Particularly to salvage what chance there may still be for you to retain custody of your child."

She gasped, struggled to maintain her air of innocence, and continued deliberately to misunderstand. "I never imagined that you could stoop *so* low."

I placed my hand on her arm, intending only to reassure her that my intentions were entirely honorable. At this she physically attacked me, leaving scratches on my face and arms that subsequently required medical treatment. In endeavoring to protect myself, I may have unintentionally tripped her — I am, of course, not accustomed to such encounters, and am ignorant of the precise degree of force needed to ward off the attack of a hysterical woman. Whatever bruises may have appeared later on her face must have been caused by her striking the floor, or some item of furniture, in her fall. (The same for her torn dress, etc.)

The child, who had evidently been

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eavesdropping somewhere nearby, now ran in shrieking. In my understandable excitement, I may have made some move toward him that could momentarily have been interpreted as threatening. He screamed as if in terror and cowered away from me. His foolish mother flew to the howling boy at once, meanwhile berating me in terms that I prefer not to dignify in print.

Maintaining my composure as best I could, with my own blood dripping from the wounds on my face, I proceeded calmly across the room to the communicator. It was clear to me at last that the woman had no intention of trying to save herself from her own folly; only one course of action remained open to me as a good citizen.

When she saw what I was doing, the woman's bravado collapsed. "Whom are you calling?"

"I'm afraid I must call the police."

The words struck terror to her guilty heart. She crossed the room to my side, cringing and pleading. I know, *now*, what monstrous thing she was concealing from the world; but *then,* though I had already initiated the call, the natural mercy of my heart was touched, and I hesitated.

As I did so, my eyes were drawn to the child by the sudden cessation of his yells. He stood facing me, feet planted wide apart, fists clenched, a scowl of utter malevolence upon his face. I can only describe his attitude as that of a ruffian about to hurl a missile or fire a gun.

Let me set down baldly what I next saw. From the vertical crease in the center of the boy's forehead, there began to emerge the squared corners of a small and very thin object. I stood watching, completely stunned. I faintly recall some policeman's voice coming from the communicator that I still held, but I was too stupefied to answer. I suppose I must have broken the connection.

Lorraine had also fallen silent. The emergence of magnetic computer film from her son's skull was no surprise to her — I could see that — but she was terrified that I should have seen it happen. She ran to the child, but her clutching fingers were too late to conceal the event. She was only in time to catch the square of film as it fell, fully extruded, from the center of the child's forehead. Only this familiar permanent "frown" crease was left as a visible hint of abnormality.

Before Lorraine's hand closed on the film, I was able to see upon it the familiar pattern of tiny rectangles, showing that it bore a set of miniaturized documents. In a flash I realized that the police would find in this apartment no common computer pirate's terminals or other electronic gear; and I understood Lorraine's deep interest in evolution and mutation. I even understood, with horror, the monstrous child's chewing on plastic toys — no doubt his metabolism re-

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quires some such bizarre nourishment to produce film by organic means.

The knowledge that I had become privy to her hideous secret, and could be expected to inform the proper authorities at once, completely overwhelmed with dread the wretched woman's heart.

"Please," she whined, "I'll do anything you say. Only don't tell. They'll take my son and make a freak out of him. He'll live like an animal in a cage for the rest of his life — please! He's never made a film to harm anyone."

I recoiled with loathing from her clutching hands; had I wanted to reply to her absurd request, I could not have done so, being still dumb with shock. Only when the police, impelled to haste by the broken communication, burst into the apartment, did I regain the power of speech.

I pointed, with a shaking finger. "There, officers. That film in the woman's hand. Seize it and examine it, and then I will tell you where it came from."

The officer in charge took the film from Lorraine's unresisting fingers. He inspected it for some moments with his pocket viewer, then raised his eyes to me. "And your name is —?"

I told him my name.

He nodded briskly to his cohort, and in an instant my arms were brutally pinioned behind my back.

"Careful with him, boys. These records from the nuthouse say he's dangerous. Did he hurt you much, lady?"

I struggled to explain the truth. Under the circumstances, is it strange that I was rather incoherent?

"No, you don't need to tell me where the records came from, mister. I've seen a thousand of 'em. March him out careful."

The truth of our lives is contained in our filmed and magnetized computer records. Or so we believe. With the flawless film before them, neither police nor doctors gave me more than a cursory examination, or heeded any of my protests. Judging from the size of the ward in which I find myself, the doctors whose signatures appear forged on my commitment record may well certify dozens of persons each month. Perhaps when they see me, they are surprised not to remember my case; perhaps they sometimes puzzle over the absence of relevant records in their own files — but no one doubts the single set of medical records that do exist.

There is a theory that the direction of evolutionary change is determined by the psychology of the species concerned; that long teeth were grown by the first tigers because those animals possessed the "souls" of carnivores. What the Mandell boy possesses, or what possesses him, I do not know. I am perfectly sure that the printing, the magnetic codes, the microtyping, the signatures, all so per-

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fectly simulated upon the perfect films that form inside his skull — all these can be no result of detailed, conscious thought or effort on his part. Some genetic response, instead, to the environment in which he lives....

I insist that I am sane, and innocent. What I have recorded *here* is the truth. I beg anyone in authority who may read this document: Begin an investigation of the monstrous child at once. I plead not only for my own sake, but for our world's survival. Investigate the child Martin Mandell at once, at once, before it is too late.

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John Brunner's latest concerns a computer conversation with a ghost, and it has one additional wrinkle, which is explained in the author's note.

Hard To Credit

BY

JOHN BRUNNER and O. H*NRY

Foreword

For a considerable while I've been planning a series of imaginary collaborations with some of the authors who have influenced my work.

*Here's the first to emerge. Devotees of O. H*nry will recognize Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker, and maybe one or two other constituents of the eventual mix.*

Let's just suppose, then, that the narrator of the stories collected under the title The Gentle Grafter *were to meet his interlocutor a century later and through a computer keyboard....*

— JKHB

TALKED TO ANY DEAD PEOPLE LATELY? inquired the guy who signs on to Cosmonet with the handle Jeff Peters, Jr.

I've never met him face-to-face, of course, and all I know about him is that he's a former corporation lawyer and a millionaire in a small way of business. I have a vague impression that he operates out of a tax haven in the Caribbean, but — like everybody else on the net — he could be anywhere.

He and I don't have all that much in common, but I'm always glad when he's free for a chat. When you're bored and insomniac, Cosmonet surely beats playing channel roulette among rerun quiz games, and I take it he feels the same way. At any rate, judging by the shape of his code, he must have been on the net since way back when.

Trying to match what I deduced was a bantering tone, I answered: HAVEN'T MET A HAPPY MEDIUM IN A LONG WHILE.

SO WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING?

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THE USUAL. MY CREDIT'S RUNNING DRY AGAIN BECAUSE I MISSED A DEADLINE. (I didn't have to explain what kind because anyone I meet through the net has already been told I'm a writer.) TONIGHT'S CHAT ISN'T ONLY OFF-THE-CUFF BUT ON THE CUFF. I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU FOUND SOMEONE WHO COULD TAKE IT WITH HIM?

Instantly I regretted that; the guy might think I was trying to tap him for a loan. And indeed his response suggested so.

AFRAID NOT, BUT IF YOU WANT TO PICK UP ON A STORY ABOUT SOMEONE WHOSE CREDIT RAN OUT COMPLETELY, YOU MIGHT TRY ANDY TUCKER. CODE FOLLOWS. SORRY I CAN'T STICK AROUND, BUT I JUST GOT AN URGENT CALL.

Blank screen. Maybe permanently.

I cursed my mistake, but I still wasn't sleepy, and I found myself wondering about this mysterious Mr. Tucker. Even if he was a knotheaded psychic, I might pass an entertaining hour with him. So I called back the code Jeff Peters had given me and punched it into the board.

And I didn't get in the least what I had bargained for.

The screen said suddenly:

ANDY TUCKER IS TALKTEMPTED.

I countered: MATCH? And appended the group defining the subjects I can chat about. It's a long list, and takes more than a second to post.

Almost at once, and to my vast surprise, the screen told me: CONGRUENCE 0.7. GO AHEAD?

Well! Even if that indicated only that "Andy Tucker" had entered several different lists, one of which largely overlapped mine, it had been ages since I had found a congruence better than 0.5 with a total stranger. I cheered up and gave a prompt answer:

AFFIRMATIVE. STANDRINK? U-PICK.

Naturally the system automatically limited the range of drinks a stranger might bill me for. Since my credit rating had been slashed, I suddenly realized I could be offering this total stranger a cup of synthetic coffee. And as soon as he tasted it, he might well quit —

I was wrong. Because the screen was saying:

THANKS, BUT NO THANKS. "I" CAN'T DRINK. BY NOW "I" MUST BE PRESUMED DEAD. QUOTE MARKS HEREINAFTER OMITTED.

What?

And I punched in exactly that, thinking of pranks and practical jokes.

The screen answered:

YOU ARE COMMUNICATING WITH A POSTHUMOUS PROGRAM. YOU ARE #1 TO DO SO. ACCESS THRESHOLD WAS INITIALLY SET AT 0.9 CONGRUENCE, REDUCED AFTER 5 YR TO 0.8, AFTER 7 YR TO 0.7.

So I was supposed to be talking to a ghost?

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Well, Cosmonet must be full of all sorts of nonsense that rich or dedicated idiots had found time and money for. After over a decade, would one not expect as much?

Entering into the spirit of what I took to be a game, I tapped: HOW'S LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Back came: GREAT. HOW'S LIFE BEFORE DEATH, IF ANY?

Mm-hm. A fairly stock gimmick, I decided, based on the kind of program I used to have to write in pharmacy school to get patients to confess all the harm they were doing to their minds and bodies. I was growing sleepy at last. Why bother to carry on? Dreams, for me, have always been at least as exciting as real life.

Still, "Andy Tucker" had a novel approach. I played along.

TERRIBLE. I RAN OUT OF CREDIT, SO YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE GOT THAT DRINK, ANYWAY.

YOU RAN OUT OF CREDIT?

I sighed. That trick of modifying and feeding back what the other party punched in went back to the early, *early* days of human-computer interaction. I poised my hand to hit the key that would remove me from the net.

But the screen beat me to it.

SO DID I. CARE TO HEAR ABOUT IT?

What the hell? I punched: RUN!

Dead or not, Andy Tucker had left a good live program. What it told me went like this.

• • •

I used to work for a firm in New Silicon Valley, back when promising ideas were spinning off faster than mud from the tires of a Camaro on a wet road. Some of them messed up rich guys' suits, but an awful lot went to join the dog dirt.

A notion that I came up with stuck tight enough to the bosses' pants for me to afford a vacation on an island where booze was cheap, the main industry was lying in the sunshine to acquire an allover tan, and every second kid on the main drag of the one and only town was wearing a promotional T-shirt and primed with sales talk for banks all set to go *rupt* next week but any applicant with less than a hundred thousand dollars needn't waste their time. I won't tell you what the rest were up to, but some of them can't have been more than eight or nine.

Me, I was eating off plastic, so I didn't much care. I carried all the major-credit cards, and the firm I'd just left had underwritten my stay in a high-class hotel and an open account with a car rental company, so pretty soon I found I was beginning to forget what ordinary money looked like. Mind you, what few bills I saw down there, mainly ones I gave as tips, did leave the impression that somebody must have used them for toilet paper at least once....

Then one morning I pushed my Ultracard into the phone beside the

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bed — I never asked for a wake-up call when I was on vacation — and got set to order breakfast.

And I waited ... and I waited ... and suddenly it dawned on me. I was listening to a tone that meant locally "phone out of service!"

So I rolled out of bed and went to take a shower. I'd had a fairly heavy night before, and needed a thorough dousing to wake me up.

Same again: I fed all my cards in turn into all the right slots, and — no hot water. No water of any kind, come to that, nor any power. I couldn't even brush my teeth, let alone shave. I wasn't even able to flush the can!

Time to go and complain to the management!

I got dressed in yesterday's clothes and headed for the reception desk, primed to raise hell. My room was on the sixth floor, and when I stuck my cards in the slot beside the elevator, they got spat right back at me. So I had to trudge down not six but eight flights of stairs, because the hotel had two floors' worth of service areas just above ground level. And whom should I find waiting for me at the reception desk?

Oh, not the manager — I guess he was still asleep. But a guy from the car rental company I'd been using, and a girl from the restaurant I'd patronized last night, and someone else from the firm that owned the beach concession nearest the hotel, and about twenty or thirty people just arrived on a package tour, all of whom were within earshot when I had to try and explain why everything I'd charged to my credit cards since arriving on the island had just been rejected by the computers back home. It looked as though I'd gone bust to the tune of a good ten thousand. Worst of all, the owners of the hotel were naturally in cahoots with the island police, who had turned out in force, and I was hauled kicking and screaming through the lobby on the grounds that I was utterly uncreditworthy and probably a confidence trickster.

But the whole deal was ridiculous. I could prove I had a balance of at least six figures. I swore at the top of my voice that I was going to get even with the sons of bitches who had accused me of being too broke to meet my bills!

A few minutes later I was dragged out of the hotel, my lawyer phoned to discuss the details of a deal we had going, and when he found my calls were being referred to the local jail, he sprang into action. He jumped on the next plane and brought with him all the data he could lay hands on concerning the firm that handled credit card transactions on the island. It was called Islocred, one of those typically parasitical operations — largely funded by laundered crime syndicate

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money, of course — that got in early when the islands were opened up to cheap tourism and were eager to sell land and other concessions to rich outsiders. But they had one problem: they had themselves laid it down as part of the deal that any financial transactions should be subject to the laws of ... well, never mind where. Just say I was overjoyed to find out that my confidence in the justice of my homeland was not misplaced.

Then, though, came what looked like a real blow to my career prospects. I had a considerable reputation as an expert in DDR — difficult data retrieval — and I'd never have quit my previous job had I not had a strong bid from another firm at twice my former salary. I was expecting to take them up on it as soon as I got home.

And my lawyer got a call, relayed from his office, to say my prospective new employers had heard this disturbing rumor about my financial stability.... I blew my top with a vengeance!

But the fact that I was actually well in credit at my own bank was down and documented, and an hour or two after my lawyer showed up, the locals were starting to look distinctly unhappy. You see, my legal chum was a member of a partnership that represented not only the hotel chain I'd picked for my vacation but also two of the banks involved in the Islocred consortium ... on which, naturally, the blame must rest for this foul and libelous accusation against a well-heeled and entirely respectable tourist.

And their expressions of gloom became positively thunderous when my mouthpiece arranged for me to be provided with a TV set and copies of the local newspaper — they still had one on the island in those days, real wood-pulp paper and horrible black ink that came off on your fingers — and I discovered that one of the junior entrepreneurs on the main drag had fed the story of my arrest to a wire service, and it was a dull day for any other kind of news, so it was making international headlines.

Maybe I exaggerate. It did get noised around my hometown, though, where a sub who'd had a grudge against me since we were in third grade made sure to put it on the cable system serving my parents and their friends, and — more to the point — it was also circulated in the area where I was expecting to find my next job. Hence that call my legal eagle had received inquiring about my status.

By sundown I was practically foaming at the mouth, but my bank had faxed in a notarized certificate of my credit, so my lawyer insisted on my release. The duty judge having quit for the day, though, the best he could do was get me out on bail, so we went together to the newspaper office and the TV station and informed them I was quitting the island right

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now, and that as soon as I got home, I was determined to tell the world what I thought of their crummy operation and especially Islocred. But, I said, I looked forward to coming back to stand my trial, and promised I'd make sure there were reporters in attendance, and when I'd been found not guilty of defrauding the hotel and the car rental company and the rest of my accusers, I'd carry on and sue Islocred for every cent they had!

We were just leaving the TV station after being interviewed on the evening news — we'd come as a godsend to the guy in charge, who hadn't had this hot a story in months — when a suave type who clearly wasn't local emerged from a long black limousine and, making significant gestures toward a bulge under his jacket, invited us to join him in the car.

We deigned to do so.

Fifteen minutes later we were in the presence of someone who spoke with the voice of authority. He had, he said, been in touch with a considerable number of his associates, and they were unanimous in regretting what had happened. It must all have been due to an error in the Islocred computer system, and they had experts working on it right now, and it seemed likely that my name and/or my credit card numbers had been confused with those employed by a known defaulter who had been reported in the area ... et cetera, et cetera. Would we accept his apologies and perhaps some small compensation for the inconvenience?

By now I'd progressed from mere fury to a kind of cold anger. I said it would take large, not small, compensation to make up for the loss of such a high salary as I'd been in line for. And what about my vacation? I still had a week to go, and it had been completely ruined, and I certainly wasn't going to accept anything like free room and board in the same hotel where my reputation had been slandered to all and sundry, and — You get the picture.

"Besides," my lawyer pal assured him, "we could expect a very generous award from any court that heard our case. Declaring someone uncreditworthy through the medium of a computer has been held in more than one instance to constitute a gross libel, even though it be by error, if the victim's public reputation was thereby significantly tarnished —"

"What have I just been telling you?" I interrupted.

The personage we had come to see pondered awhile, then invited us to stay put while he adjourned to another room and debated with his associates on a conference phone link. A silent flunky brought us drinks. We said nothing, just brooded.

Shortly our host returned and named a figure, and we accepted. It was clear from his tone and manner what would happen if we didn't. He put us back in his limousine and sent

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us to the airport, and when we got home, we found he'd kept his promise.

So I credded Jeff his share of the proceeds, and —

Hold on!" I burst out, and, on remembering he couldn't hear me, tapped the same into the board, adding: WAS YOUR LAWYER THE GUY I KNOW AS JEFF PETERS, JR?

The screen said: CHUCKLE. HOW ELSE DO YOU THINK I RAISED THE MONEY TO LAUNCH COSMONET?

YOU MEAN YOU'RE ADMITTING YOU RIGGED THE WHOLE DEAL?

I TOLD YOU: "I" AM DEAD. OR AT ANY RATE THE STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS MUST APPLY, WHICH AMOUNTS TO THE SAME THING. OTHERWISE NOBODY COULD ACCESS THIS PROGRAM. NICE TALKING TO YOU, MR. HENRY.

WAIT!

YES?

IF YOU WERE THE GUY WHO FOUNDED COSMONET, SURELY

I got that far, when the screen was preempted.

OH, I DIDN'T WANT MY COUP TO REMAIN A SCRET FOREVER. SAY I WAS VAIN. SAY I STILL AM, IF YOU LIKE. I MUST HAVE BEEN A CONCEITED BASTARD TO THINK OF LEAVING THIS PROGRAM BEHIND, MUSTN'T I? EVEN IF I'M NOT DEAD, AFTER ALL!

GOOD NIGHT!

Coming soon

Next month: "You Never Asked My Name" by **Brian Aldiss**, "The Bird of Time Bears Bitter Fruit" by **George Alec Effinger** "The High Purpose" by **Barry Malzberg** and **Carter Scholz.**

Soon: a new story of the Great North Rift by **James Tiptree**; new stories by **Michael Bishop, Michael Shea, Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard, Ian Watson, Gregory Benford, Robert F. Young, Jane Yolen, Richard Cowper** and many others. Please use the coupon on page 102; it is your last chance to subscribe at a special low rate.

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A LITTLE LEAVEN

My beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, Robyn, who is now on the job as a psychiatric social worker, got together with her lovely co-worker the other day and decided to compose a fiery memo denouncing some practice or other they considered heinous.

They got paper and pens (the easy part) and then started brooding over the wording. Minutes passed, and nothing came to them except a dozen false starts. Finally, Robyn, throwing down her pen in exasperation, said, "Do you believe I'm my father's daughter?"

When she told me the story that night, I laughed, for when she was a little girl, there was a widespread disbelief over that very matter. Since Robyn's mother was, in this matter, completely above suspicion (either by me or by anyone else), the general theory was that Robyn had been accidentally switched in the hospital with my true offspring. (Actually, I know that is not true for Robyn has, with time, developed unmistakeable Asimovian features and, if it is possible for a gorgeous woman to look like me, she does.)

Nevertheless, friends of mine staring at a little girl with blonde hair who looked precisely like the John Tenniel illustrations of Alice in "Alice in Wonderland" (she was asked to play the role, at sight, in her grammar

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school) and then looking at me with a certain shudder of revulsion, would say, "Are you sure you weren't given the wrong child at the hospital?"

At which I would invariably put my arms around her protectively, and say, "Who cares? I'm keeping this one."

I told Robyn of this when we talked about the unwritten memo and said that, listening to all the comments of this sort, she was in a good position to make much of the very common fantasy of children that their parents were not really their parents and that the children were, instead, the kidnapped offspring of royalty.

"Never!" said Robyn, forcefully. "Never! Not for one moment at any time did I ever doubt that you and Mamma were my parents."

Which pleases me. Both Robyn and I have a strong sense of duty. I would discharge my paternal obligations punctiliously even if I didn't particularly like her, and she would be equally punctilious, I am quite certain, about being filial under such circumstances. However, there is a tight bond of affection between the two of us which makes all that duty an unbelievable pleasure.

And the same, I can't help thinking, goes for these essays. Having agreed to provide the Noble Editor with one essay an issue, I would certainly perform that chore dutifully even if it proved to be a royal pain in the whatever. However, I enjoy the process so much that I keep it up month after month with a light laugh on my lips. In fact, if I have a difficulty, it lies in confining myself to doing merely twelve a year.*

I have spent the three previous essays on vitamins, and it will probably seem to you, as you read, that I am changing the subject — but only apparently, as you will eventually see.

People discovered, in prehistoric times, that if ears of grains are heated and moistened to form a dough and then pounded flat, a nutritious substance could be produced in quantity. It would keep so well that, if the grain were deliberately cultivated, the resulting hard bread would help support an unprecedentedly high density of population. Of course, the eating of such hardtack required good teeth, a strong digestion, and a sturdy disregard for the more effete pleasures of gourmet dining.

**So if you should happen to be moved to write to the Noble Editor in order to urge him to put out an issue now and then that includes* two *of my essays, go ahead. See if I care.*

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And then, in ancient Egypt, perhaps about 3500 B.C., it was discovered that a particular strain of wheat separated so easily from its chaff that it did not require much in the way of preliminary heating. Such unheated wheat, if ground, moistened, and beaten, would occasionally not remain flat and hard but would begin to puff up all by itself.

Undoubtedly the tendency would be to throw away such spoiled material but, under the pressure of a grain shortage, such puffy material might have been baked anyway, and the result would be a soft bread, spongy and filled with tiny holes, and unparalleled in flavor and texture.

What happened (as we now know) was that yeast cells, which are always floating in air along with uncounted varieties of other spores and seeds of microorganisms, fungi, and plants, get into mashed up grain. There they live on the components of the grain, forming carbon dioxide and alcohol in the process.

If the grain has been too strongly heated, it is too hot for the yeast to live in it. If it is then moistened, pounded flat and heated to dryness it becomes too dry for the yeast to live in it. If the grain is anything other than wheat, then even if yeast lives in it, the bubbles that form escape from the grain and leave little mark, or at best, a crumbly mess. It is only in wheat not heated strongly and allowed to stand, tht the carbon dioxide and the alcohol vapor can't escape. They are trapped in a sticky protein named "gluten," and, when next baked, expand without breaking, forming small gluten bubbles filled with gas. Eventually, the baking process kills the yeast and drives off the carbon dioxide and the alcohol vapor, but leaves the bubbles, now filled with air.

At first, perhaps, bread makers had to rely on each batch of dough happening to accumulate yeast. But then they stumbled upon a way of assuring success. They would just save a bit of the bubbling dough, unbaked, and bake the rest. The bit of unbaked dough they would add to a fresh batch of dough, and on standing, all the fresh dough would bubble. You could continue to pass the stuff from batch to batch and get good raised bread all the time.

One word in English for the material that causes the dough to bubble is "leaven," from a Latin word meaning "to rise," because the dough, as it traps carbon dioxide, rises. Leaven may also be referred to as a "ferment," from a Latin word meaning "to boil" since the bubble formation is reminiscent of that which takes place when a liquid boils. The word "yeast" itself seems to be related to Greek and Sanskrit words meaning "to boil."

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In ancient times, leaven was not thought of as being alive, since it didn't seem to have the attributes of life. It didn't move and jump around, for instance. And yet, with the wisdom of hindsight, we wonder that it didn't strike anyone as odd that a small batch of leaven could infect a whole new batch of dough over and over. Wasn't the leaven multiplying itself? And isn't that an attribute of life?

Perhaps people simply didn't wonder about such things, or if they did, in the context of those times, they looked upon it as a moral lesson, rather than as scientific evidence. St. Paul, in two different places quotes the saying "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." The phrase is analogous to our "One rotten apple spoils the barrel." It seems to be used as an indication that if even a trifling misbehavior or sin enters the soul, that soul will eventually be entirely corrupted — just as one sinner in a group will eventually corrupt the whole crowd.

In fact, the new soft "leavened bread" may have been viewed as the result of corruption — or perhaps it was just a matter of the strong grip of tradition on religious practices — for we still use flat, unleavened bread on certain occasions such as Passover, or in communion wafers. (I suspect, though, that modern unleavened bread is better than the prehistoric variety. At least, I eat matzos with pleasure at any time of the year.)

Yeast will also convert fruit juice to wine and soaked barley sprouts to beer, and that, too, is older than history.

It was not till the early 19th Century that these fermentation processes came to be studied systematically by chemists.

In 1833, a French chemist, Anselme Payen (1795-1871), separated a substance from grain-sprouts which was *not* whatever it was that produced beer. The substance did, however, convert starch to sugar more quickly than such a change would take place spontaneously. Payen called the substance "diastase" from a Greek word meaning "to separate" (though I'm not sure why Payen thought that term was appropriate).

This speeding of a chemical reaction was a phenomenon that had been discovered in the course of the previous quarter-century, and the process had been named "catalysis" (see THE HASTE-MAKERS, F & SF, September 1964), but the substances that brought about catalysis had, till then, been inorganic substances such as powdered platinum. In 1811, a catalytic method had been discovered even for the speedy pro-

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duction of sugar from starch that Payen was studying, but the catalyst had, in that earlier case, been dilute mineral acids.

Diastase differed from those catalysts, earlier known, in being an organic material. It deserved, therefore, a special name. Such organic catalysts came to be known as "ferments," thus indicating a relationship to whatever it was that brought about the fermentation processes that produced beer, wine, and leavened bread.

It was known at that time that there was something in the stomach lining that broke up, or "digested," protein molecules. In 1836, the German physiologist Theodor Schwann (1810-1882) treated stomach linings in such a way as to isolate the active principle. It was another ferment and he called it "pepsin," from the Greek word for "to digest." It was the first ferment to be isolated from animal tissue.

Obviously, leaven was (or contained) a ferment, too; one that catalyzed a reaction that converted the starch of grain, or the sugar of fruit juice, to carbon dioxide and alcohol. Still, there was a difference between leaven and ferments such as diastase and pepsin. Diastase and pepsin existed in definite quantity and were eventually used up. Leaven, on the other hand, seemed to form more of itself indefinitely. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Schwann came up with a notion about this, one he reached rather indirectly.

He began, actually, by considering putrefaction. He noticed that if meat was boiled and then kept in heated air, it did not putrefy. Schwann felt that there were microorganisms that existed in the meat and in the air, and that these brought about putrefaction. Heat killed the microorganisms and therefore stopped the putrefaction.

There were other scientists, however, who thought that putrefaction was not brought about by microorganisms, but by oxygen, and that heat somehow damaged the oxygen. To test that, Schwann heated air and then let a frog breathe it. The frog got along perfectly well on the heated air so Schwann didn't think anything was wrong with the oxygen.

To test this further, Schwann suspended leaven in water, boiled it, and then supplied it with heated air and expected to see that it would still ferment sugar and starch, thus again proving the oxygen to be undamaged. *But that didn't happen. The fermentation was stopped.*

Schwann had to reverse his attitude. It was known that leaven con-

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tained microscopic little globs that just sat there and did nothing, so that no one thought of them as living. However, since heat apparently stopped the leaven from working, Schwann announced, in 1837, that the blobs must be living yeast cells that could be killed by heat.

He was just beaten to the punch here by a French physicist, Charles Cagniard de la Tour (1777-1859), who, looking at the globs in leaven under the microscope, had actually seen them bud and produce new cells. They lived and reproduced, so no wonder a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

This view met with resistance, however, from the foremost chemists of the day. The German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803-1873) was a particular opponent. He insisted forcefully that fermentation was a chemical process and not a biological one, and so great was his prestige that he carried his point for twenty years.

But then came an even greater scientist than Liebig — the French chemist, Louis Pasteur (1822-1895). He investigated fermentation in great detail, studying leaven carefully under the microscope and indulging in subtle experimentation. He found, for instance, that leaven could not carry out fermentation if its environment were lacking in nitrogen, which was to be expected of living material. By 1857, he had shown, beyond any question or doubt, that leaven, in carrying through fermentation, absorbed nutrients, grew and reproduced — in short, that it consisted of living yeast cells.

In 1875, a German biochemist, Wilhelm Friedrich Kühne (1837-1900), isolated another digestive ferment. This one was from pancreatic juice and Kühne called it "trypsin," from another Greek word that implied "digestion." Like pepsin, trypsin broke down protein molecules, but the two ferments were not identical, for whereas pepsin worked only in strongly acid solutions, trypsin worked only in slightly alkaline solutions.

In the light of Pasteur's work, Kühne decided there had to be two kind of ferments. There was one kind that worked only as part of a living cell such as yeast ("organized ferment") and another kind that could be extracted from tissue and would do its work even though it was not part of anything actually living ("unorganized ferment").

Kühne felt the distinction to be a fundamental one, so that it was worth noting in the scientific vocabulary. He suggested, in the same year in which he discovered trypsin, that the word "ferment" be re-

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stricted (for historic reasons) to the substances in living cells. The unorganized ferments, like diastase, pepsin, and trypsin, he suggested be called "enzymes" from Greek words meaning "in yeast." It was a poor name for his purposes, since the unorganized ferments were *not* in yeast. What he meant, though, was that they resembled, in action, those ferments that *were* in yeast. In any case, the word "enzyme," now such an integral and well known part of even ordinary language, thus came into use in 1875.

It was useless to make this distinction, however, unless it *was* a distinction. It was important to show that any destruction of the integrity of the yeast cell would stop fermentation. Heat would do the trick, of course, but it would be still more impressive if simple mechanical destruction of the yeast cell — just pulling it apart into fragments, at room temperature — would stop the fermentation. If that could be shown, then it was reasonable to suppose that the ferment was not simply a substance within the yeast cell, but was the work of the cell as a whole.

Taking up that task, in 1896, was a German chemist, Eduard Buchner (1860-1917), and he did so at the suggestion of his elder brother, Hans, who was himself an eminent chemist.

What Buchner did was to place yeast in a mixture of sand and diatomaceous earth and grind the whole in a mortar vigorously. Undoubtedly, the yeast cells would all be punctured and shredded by this sort of treatment, though individual molecules, it might be surmised, would not be affected.

By this treatment, Buchner quickly converted the leaven into a thick paste. He wrapped the paste in thick canvas and placed the whole under high pressure, so as to squeeze a liquid fluid out of it. This fluid represented the liquid contents of the yeast cell and, when Buchner studied the liquid under the microscope, no intact yeast cells could be found in it.

Buchner was quite convinced, even in advance of testing the matter, that this fluid would have no fermenting effect at all, but he didn't want it to go bad. He wanted no infestation by microorganisms to induce chemical changes and render his results dubious. Nor did he want to be in a situation where he had to spend all his time grinding and squeezing new batches so he could conduct his experiments only with fresh fluids.

One way of preserving a tissue extract against bacterial action is to dump a lot of sugar into it. While bacteria like sugar even as you and I,

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making a solution stiff with it is going too far for them. (It is this same principle that is used by people who prepare fruit preserves, jams and jellies. The sugar preservative not only prevents it from spoiling but makes the entire preparation taste heavenly to children — or to those with youthful hearts, such as I.)

Buchner dumped his sugar into the yeast juice, therefore, and I am fond of imagining that he jumped at least five feet after he did so, for the sugar solution started fermenting. It was precisely what he did not expect.

It was clear, then, that yeast contained a ferment that could be withdrawn from the cell, and would still do its work precisely as it had done when it was part of the cell. Buchner named the ferment "zymase," from the Greek word for "yeast."

It could be seen that there was no true distinction between ferments and enzymes. Any ferment that was inside a cell could, with the proper treatment, be extracted from the cell without losing any of its catalytic abilities. Biochemists might as well call them all ferments, or all enzymes — and the decision was to call them all enzymes.

Buchner won the Nobel prize in Chemistry in 1907 for this work. He then went on to volunteer for service the instant World War I broke out, even though he was 54 at the time. The German authorities were stupid enough to accept his quixotic gesture, and he was shot dead in 1917 on the Rumanian front. Surely the Germans could have found greater use for his brains, than to place him in the front lines as a bullet-stopping device. (Nearly half a century earlier, when Pasteur, at 48, had tried to volunteer for service in the Franco-Prussian war, the French patted him soothingly on his head and told him he was worth more to the nation and the world in his laboratory.)

Now that enzymes could be defined, without reference to living cells, as "organic catalysts," the question was: What were they?

There are a vast number of different types of organic compounds. Were enzymes spread all over the lot, or were they members of a close-knit group of one type or another?

This was not something that was easy to determine. Catalysts, in general, work in a very small concentration, and even that very little goes a long, long way. Catalysts don't necessarily take part in a reaction, but sometimes merely offer a surface upon which a chemical reaction can, for one reason or another, take place easily. As I like to describe it, they

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are like a small desk-top on which you can rest a paper sheet and much more easily write a note than you could upon the same paper sheet suspended in midair. You need but one such desk-top on which to write a million notes, and, amid the blizzard of paper it might well be difficult to locate that desk-top catalyst.

What most chemists assumed, though, was that enzymes were proteins. The proteins, of all the different types of organic material, possessed the most complicated molecules. It was easy to visualize each one as having a molecular surface of a distinct and characteristic shape. A proper surface would just fit certain reacting substances and allow them to react much more quickly than they would otherwise. What's more, protein molecules could have such precisely-shaped surfaces, that each could fit only one molecule, and no other. That would account for why an enzyme might be able to catalyze a reaction involving one particular molecule and no other. That is what is called the "specificity" of enzyme action.

The enzyme theory seemed to be a perfect explanation for enzymes, but it did have the drawback that no one seemed to be able to prove it. In fact, the most careful investigation seemed to end in disproof.

The German chemist Richard Willstätter (1872-1942) undertook to investigate the matter between 1918 and 1925. He purified solutions of a variety of different enzymes. In each case, he got rid of inert impurities, leaving himself with a solution of undiminished enzyme strength, but with less and less dissolved material in it as the purification process went on.

In the end, Willstätter found himself with clear solutions that exhibited full enzyme activity but that showed no signs of protein content. Using the most delicate tests for protein in his repertoire, Willstätter came up with a definite negative. He concluded that enzymes were not protein in nature, but were probably small molecules. In view of many of the properties of enzyme action, this seemed a dubious conclusion, but Willstätter was a crackerjack chemist who had won the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1915 for his work on chlorophyll and other plant pigments, and few liked to argue the point with him.

And yet even as Willstätter was working toward his conclusion, an American biochemist, James Batchellor Sumner (1887-1955), was working toward another.

Sumner was particularly interested in an enzyme which broke down the waste product, urea, into the still smaller molecules of ammonia and

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carbon dioxide. The enzyme was called "urease." (The "ase" ending, first used by Payen in diastase, has become universal for the names of enzymes and enzyme-groups, with a very few exceptions in the case of those enzymes, like pepsin and trypsin, that became well known before the convention was firmly established.)

A seed called the "jackbean" was particularly rich in urease, and while Willstätter was purifying his enzyme solutions, Sumner was purifying his jackbean extracts. It took Sumner nine years to learn to purify it in a satisfactory manner, but at the end of that period he obtained small crystals, which, on solution, showed very strong urease activity.

Sumner decided that those crystals were actually crystals of urease — the thing itself. When he tested those crystals, they reacted strongly positive to tests for proteins. His conclusion, in 1926, despite Willstätter's work, was that urease was a protein. What's more, if one enzyme is a protein, it seems a reasonable possibility that others are, too; and it is even possible that all of them are.

Willstätter shook his head. He dismissed Sumner's work rather cavalierly. Willstätter was famous and highly regarded, and Sumner was a relative nobody. Sumner's work, therefore, was not accepted for several years.

Also interested in the matter, however, was another American biochemist, John Howard Northrop (1891-). Following the line of Sumner's work, he crystallized pepsin in 1930. Then, in 1932, he crystallized trypsin; and in 1935, chymotrypsin (still another digestive enzyme). All were found to be proteins.

What's more, Northrop's procedures were simple and systematic and could be easily followed by anyone. A large number of enzymes have been crystallized since and all have proved to be proteins.

The matter was settled beyond all doubt, and Willstätter was wrong. In 1946, Sumner and Northrop won shares of the Nobel prize for chemistry.

What was wrong with Willstätter? He was a first-class chemist and would not make foolish mistakes. Actually, he didn't. He ended up with an enzyme solution showing strong activity and very little in the way of impurities. That solution, however, contained so few enzyme molecules (very few are needed, after all) that even the most sensitive protein test at Willstätter's disposal had really failed to indicate anything. His work was meticulous and his conclusions reasonable — but this is an example of the unreliability of a negative result. Showing something to be

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not-A is never comfortably sufficient unless you also show it to be yes-B.

Sumner and Northrop, on the other hand, managed to treat the solution in such a way as to get the enzyme out in solid, crystalline form. They then dissolved it in the smallest convenient amount of water and obtained a concentrated solution which gave a positive reaction to all tests for proteins. That is all very easy to see — after the fact.

Proteins, as it happens, are made up of chains of amino acids. A number of them are made up of nothing else than that; and they are "simple proteins." Among the enzymes, pepsin and trypsin are examples of simple proteins.

Some proteins, however, are made up of amino acid chains, plus portions that are *not* amino acid chains. They are called "conjugated proteins." Some enzymes are conjugated proteins. Examples are "catalase," "peroxidase" and "cytochrome oxidase."

If the non-amino acid portion is firmly attached to the protein, it is called a "prosthetic group." In some enzymes, however, the non-amino acid portion is not firmly attached to the protein but is easily removed. The removed portion is called a "coenzyme," and it is the coenzyme that is highly significant in connection with vitamins (aha!).

However, since I have run out of space, we will consider the connection of coenzymes and vitamins next month.

(from page 111)

again, and know a masterpiece when we (and posterity) see one — the Judy Garland musical was hardly the definitive interpretation. And comparing the two films is sheer foolishness. And vilifying *Return to Oz* because it has some genuinely inspired moments of real terror on the grounds that the 1939 film had a purer heart, loses sight of the horrors MGM built into that movie. Or have you forgotten those damned blue, winged monkey monsters *schlepping* Dorothy into the sky as their buddies stomp the crap out of the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodsman? No, my readers, turn a deaf ear to the boos and catcalls of the trendy critics who refuse to judge this absolutely marvelous film on its own merits. Take your kids, let them scream, let your eyes drink in marvels. *Return to Oz* is everything we hoped for.

Also, if *Night of the Comet* comes available on videocassette, catch up on what you missed when it was briefly in theaters, and treat yourself to the same kind of pleasure you derived from Repo Man. But these four films come with a warning: they may make you think. And that can be painful for the head what am empty.

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Although it has been a number of years since Orson Scott Card ("Closing the Timelid," December 1979) has appeared in F&SF, the wait has been worthwhile. "The Fringe" presents us with a powerful picture of a devastated North America trying to rebuild through the efforts of a few concerned people who must combat not only the landscape but human ignorance and greed.

The Fringe

BY

ORSON SCOTT CARD

LaVon's book report was drivel, of course. Carpenter knew it would be from the moment he called on the boy. After Carpenter's warning last week, he knew LaVon would have a book report — LaVon's father would never let the boy be suspended. But LaVon was too stubborn, too cocky, too much the leader of the other sixth-graders' constant rebellion against authority to let Carpenter have a complete victory.

"I really, truly loved *Little Men*," said LaVon. "It just gave me goose bumps."

The class laughed. Excellent comic timing, Carpenter said silently. But the only place that comedy is useful here in the New Soil country is with the gypsy pageant wagons. That's what you're preparing yourself for, LaVon, a career as a wandering parasite who lives by sucking laughter out of weary farmers.

"Everybody nice in this book has a name that starts with D. Demi is a sweet little boy who never does anything wrong. Daisy is so good that she could have seven children and still be a virgin."

He was pushing the limits now. A lot of people didn't like mention of sexual matters in the school, and if some pinheaded child decided to report this, the story could be twisted into something that could be used against Carpenter. Out here near the fringe, people were desperate for entertainment. A crusade to drive out a teacher for corrupting the morals of youth would be more fun than a traveling show, because everybody could feel righteous and safe when he was gone. Carpenter had seen it before. not that he was afraid of it, the way most teachers were. *He* had a career no matter what. The university would

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take him back, eagerly; they thought he was crazy to go out and teach in the low schools. I'm safe, absolutely safe, he thought. They can't wreck my career. And I'm not going to get prissy about a perfectly good word like *virgin*.

"Dan looks like a big bad boy, but he has a heart of gold, even though he does say real bad words like *devil* sometimes." LaVon paused, waiting for Carpenter to react. So Carpenter did not react.

"The saddest thing is poor Nat, the street fiddler's boy. He tries hard to fit in, but he can never amount to anything in the book, because his name doesn't start with D."

The end. LaVon put the single paper on Carpenter's desk, then went back to his seat. He walked with the careful elegance of a spider, each long leg moving as if it were unconnected to the rest of his body, so that even walking did not disturb the perfect calm. The boy rides on his body the way I ride in my wheelchair, thought Carpenter. Smooth, unmoved by his own motion. But *he* is graceful and beautiful, fifteen years old and already a master at winning the devotion of the weakhearted children around him. *He* is the enemy, the torturer, the strong and beautiful man who must confirm his beauty by preying on the weak. I am not as weak as you think.

LaVon's book report was arrogant, far too short, and flagrantly rebellious. That much was deliberate, calculated to annoy Carpentor. Therefore Carpenter would not show the slightest trace of annoyance. The book report had also been clever, ironic, and funny. The boy, for all his mask of languor and stupidity, had brains. He was better than this farming town; he could do something that mattered in the world besides driving a tractor in endless contour patterns around the fields. But the way he always had the Fisher girl hanging on him, he'd no doubt have a baby and a wife and stay here forever. Become a big shot like his father, maybe, but never leave a mark in the world to show he'd been there. Tragic, stupid waste.

But don't show the anger. The children will misunderstand, they'll think I'm angry because of LaVon's rebelliousness, and it will only make this boy more of a hero in their eyes. Children choose their heroes with unerring stupidity. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, all they know of life is cold and bookless classrooms interrupted now and then by a year or two of wrestling with this stony earth, always hating whatever adult it is who keeps them at their work, always adoring whatever fool gives them the illusion of being free. You children have no practice in surviving among the ruins of your own mistakes. We adults who knew the world before it fell, we feel the weight of the rubble on our backs.

They were waiting for Carpenter's

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answer. He reached out to the computer keyboard attached to his wheelchair. His hands struck like paws at the oversized keys. His fingers were too stupid for him to use them individually. They clenched when he tried to work them, tightened into a fist, a little hammer with which to strike, to break, to attack; he could not use them to grasp or even hold. Half the verbs of the world are impossible to me, he thought as he often thought. I learn them the way the blind learn words of seeing — by rote, with no hope of ever knowing truly what they mean.

The speech synthesizer droned out the words he keyed. "Brilliant essay, Mr. Jensen. The irony was powerful, the savagery was refreshing. Unfortunately, it also revealed the poverty of your soul. Alcott's title was ironic, for she wanted to show that despite their small size, the boys in her book were great-hearted. You, however, despite your large size, are very small of heart indeed."

LaVon looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes. Hatred? Yes, it was there. Do hate me, child. Loathe me enough to show me that you can do anything I ask you to do. Then I'll own you, then I can get something decent out of you, and finally give you back to yourself as a human being who is worthy to be alive.

Carpenter pushed outward on both levers, and his wheelchair backed up. The day was nearly over, and tonight he knew some thing would change, painfully, in the life of the town of Reefrock. And because in a way the arrests would be his fault, and because the imprisonment of a father would cause upheaval in some of these children's families, he felt it his duty to prepare them as best he could to understand why it had to happen, why, in the larger view, it was good. It was too much to expect that they would actually understand, today; but they might remember, might forgive him someday for what they would soon find out he had done to them.

So he pawed at the keys again. "Economics," said the computer. "Since Mr. Jensen has made an end of literature for the day." A few more keys, and the lecture began. Carpenter entered all his lectures and stored them in memory, so that he could sit still as ice in his chair, making eye contact with each student in turn, daring them to be inattentive. There were advantages in letting a machine speak for him; he had learned many years ago that it frightened people to have a mechanical voice speak his words while his lips were motionless. It was monstrous, it made him seem dangerous and strange. Which he far preferred to the way he looked: weak as a worm, his skinny, twisted, palsied body rigid in his chair; his body looked strange but pathetic. Only when the synthesizer spoke his acid words did he earn respect from the people who always, always looked downward at him.

"Here in the settlements just be-

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hind the fringe," his voice went, "we do not have the luxury of a free economy. The rains sweep onto this ancient desert and find nothing here but a few plants growing in the sand. Thirty years ago nothing lived here; even the lizards had to stay where there was something for insects to eat, where there was water to drink. Then the fires we lit put a curtain in the sky, and the ice moved south, and the rains that had always passed north of us now raked and scoured the desert. It was opportunity."

LaVon smirked as Kippie made a great show of dozing off. Carpenter keyed an interruption in the lecture. "Kippie, how well will you sleep if I send you home now for an afternoon nap?"

Kippie sat bolt upright, pretending terrible fear. But the pretense was also a pretense; he *was* afraid, and so to conceal it he pretended to be pretending to be afraid. Very complex, the inner life of children, thought Carpenter.

"Even as the old settlements were slowly drowned under the rising Great Salt Lake, your fathers and mothers began to move out into the desert, to reclaim it. But not alone. We can do nothing alone here. The fringers plant their grass. The grass feeds the herds and puts roots into the sand. The roots become humus, rich in nitrogen. In three years the fringe has a thin lace of soil across it. If at any point a fringer fails to plant, if at any point the soil is broken, then the rains eat channels under it, and tear away the fringe on either side, and eat back into farmland behind it. So every fringer is responsible to every other fringer, and to us. How would you feel about a fringer who failed?"

"The way I feel about a fringer who succeeds," said Pope. He was the youngest of the sixth-graders, only thirteen years old, and he sucked up to LaVon disgracefully.

Carpenter punched four codes. "And how is that?" asked Carpenter's metal voice.

Pope's courage fled. "Sorry."

Carpenter did not let go. "What is it you call fringers?" he asked. He looked from one child to the next, and they would not meet his gaze. Except LaVon.

"What do you call them?" he asked again.

"If I say it, I'll get kicked out of school," said LaVon. "You want me kicked out of school?"

"You accuse them of fornicating with cattle, yes?"

A few giggles.

"Yes, sir," said LaVon. "We call them cow-fornicators, sir."

Carpenter keyed in his response while they laughed. When the room was silent, he played it back. "The bread you eat grows in the soil they created, and the manure of their cattle is the strength of your bodies. Without fringers you would be eking out a miserable life on the shores of the Mormon Sea, eating fish and

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drinking sage tea, and don't forget it." He set the volume of the synthesizer steadily lower during the speech, so that at the end they were straining to hear.

Then he resumed his lecture. "After the fringers came your mothers and fathers, planting crops in a scientifically planned order: two rows of apple trees, then six meters of wheat, then six meters of corn, then six meters of cucumbers, and so on; year after year, moving six more meters out, following the fringers, making more land, more food. If you didn't plant what you were told, and harvest it on the right day, and work shoulder to shoulder in the fields whenever the need came, then the plants would die, the rain would wash them away. What do you think of the farmer who does not do his labor or take his work turn?"

"Scum," one child said. And another: "He's a wallow, that's what he is."

"If this land is to be truly alive, it must be planted in a careful plan for eighteen years. Only then will your family have the luxury of deciding what crop to plant. Only then will you be able to be lazy if you want to, or work extra hard and profit from it. Then some of you can get rich, and others can become poor. But now, today, we do everything together, equally, and so we share equally in the rewards of our work."

LaVon murmured something.

"Yes, LaVon?" asked Carpenter. He made the computer speak very loudly. It startled the children.

"Nothing," said LaVon.

"You said, 'Except teachers.'"

"What if I did?"

"You are correct," said Carpenter. "Teachers do not plow and plant in the fields with your parents. Teachers are given much more barren soil to work in, and most of the time the few seeds we plant are washed away with the first spring shower. You are living proof of the futility of our labor. But we try, Mr. Jensen, foolish as the effort is. May we continue?"

LaVon nodded. His face was flushed. Carpenter was satisfied. The boy was not hopeless — he could still feel shame at having attacked a man's livelihood.

"There are some among us," said the lecture, "who believe they should benefit more than others from the work of all. These are the ones who steal from the common storehouse and sell the crops that were raised by everyone's labor. The black market pays high prices for the stolen grain, and the thieves get rich. When they get rich enough, they move away from the fringe, back to the cities of the high valleys. Their wives will wear fine clothing, their sons will have watches, their daughters will own land and marry well. And in the meantime, their friends and neighbors, who trusted them, will have nothing, will stay on the fringe, growing the food that feeds the thieves. Tell me, what

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do you think of a black marketeer?"

He watched their faces. Yes, they knew. He could see how they glanced surreptitiously at Dick's new shoes, at Kippie's wristwatch. At Yutonna's new city-bought blouse. At LaVon's jeans. They knew, but out of fear they had said nothing. Or perhaps it wasn't fear. Perhaps it was the hope that their own fathers would be clever enough to steal from the harvest, so they could move away instead of earning out their eighteen years.

"Some people think these thieves are clever. But I tell you they are exactly like the mobbers of the plains. They are the enemies of civilization."

"*This* is civilization?" asked LaVon.

"Yes." Carpenter keyed an answer. "We live in peace here, and you know that today's work brings tomorrow's bread. Out on the prairie they don't know that. Tomorrow a mobber will be eating their bread, if they haven't been killed. There's no trust in the world, except here. And the black marketeers feed on trust. Their neighbors' trust. When they've eaten it all, children, what will you live on then?"

They didn't understand, of course. When it was story problems about one truck approaching another truck at sixty kleeters and it takes an hour to meet, how far away were they? — the children could handle that, could figure it out laboriously with pencil and paper and prayers and curses. But the questions that mattered sailed past them like little dust devils, noticed but untouched by their feeble, self-centered little minds.

He tormented them with a pop quiz on history and thirty spelling words for their homework, then sent them out the door.

LaVon did not leave. He stood by the door, closed it, spoke. "It was a stupid book," he said.

Carpenter clicked the keyboard. "That explains why you wrote a stupid book report."

"It wasn't stupid. It was funny. I read the damn book, didn't I?"

"And I gave you a B."

LaVon was silent a moment, then said, "Do me no favors."

"I never will."

"And shut up with that goddamn machine voice. You can make a voice yourself. My cousin's got palsy and she howls to the moon."

"You may leave now, Mr. Jensen."

"I'm gonna hear you talk in your natural voice someday, Mr. Machine."

"You had better go home now, Mr. Jensen."

LaVon opened the door to leave, then turned abruptly and strode the dozen steps to the head of the class. His legs now were tight and powerful as horses' legs, and his arms were light and strong. Carpenter watched him and felt the same old fear rise within him. If God was going to let him be born like this, he could at least keep him safe from the torturers.

"What do you want, Mr. Jensen?" But before the computer had finished

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speaking Carpenter's words, LaVon reached out and took Carpenter's wrists, held them tightly. Carpenter did not try to resist; if he did, he might go tight and twist around on the chair like a slug on a hot shovel. That would be more humiliation than he could bear, to have this boy see him writhe. His hands hung limp from LaVon's powerful fists.

"You just mind your business," LaVon said. "You only been here two years, you don't know nothin', you understand? You don't see nothin', you don't say nothin', you understand?"

So it wasn't the book report at all. LaVon had actually understood the lecture about civilization and the black market. And knew that it was LaVon's own father, more than anyone else in town, who was guilty. Nephi Delos Jensen, big shot foreman of Reefrock Farms. Have the marshals already taken your father? Best get home and see.

"Do you understand me?"

But Carpenter would not speak. Not without his computer. This boy would never hear how Carpenter's own voice sounded, the whining, baying sound, like a dog trying to curl its tongue into human speech. You'll never hear my voice, boy.

"Just try to expel me for this, Mr. Carpenter. I'll say it never happened. I'll say you had it in for me."

Then he let go of Carpenter's hands and stalked from the room. Only then did Carpenter's legs go rigid, lifting him on the chair so that only the computer over his lap kept him from sliding off. His arms pressed outward, his neck twisted, his jaw opened wide. It was what his body did with fear and rage; it was why he did his best never to feel those emotions. Or any others, for that matter. Dispassionate, that's what he was. He lived the life of the mind, since the life of the body was beyond him. He stretched across his wheelchair like a mocking crucifix, hating his body and pretending that he was merely waiting for it to calm, to relax.

And it did, of course. As soon as he had control of his hands again, he took the computer out of speech mode and called up the data he had sent on to Zarahemla yesterday morning. The crop estimates for three years, and the final weight of the harvested wheat and corn, cukes and berries, apples and beans. For the first two years, the estimates were within 2 percent of the final total. The third year the estimates were higher, but the harvest stayed the same. It was suspicious. Then the bishop's accounting records. It was a sick community. When the bishop was also seduced into this sort of thing, it meant the rottenness touched every corner of village life. Reefrock Farms looked no different from the hundred other villages just this side of the fringe, but it was diseased. Did Kippie know that even his father was in on the black

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marketeering? If you couldn't trust the bishop, who was left?

The words of his own thoughts tasted sour in his mouth. Diseased. They aren't so sick, Carpenter, he told himself. Civilization has always had its parasites, and survived. But it survived because it rooted them out from time to time, cast them away and cleansed the body. Yet they made heroes out of the thieves and despised those who reported them. There's no thanks in what I've done. It isn't love I'm earning. It isn't love I feel. Can I pretend that I'm not just a sick and twisted body taking vengeance on those healthy enough to have families, healthy enough to want to get every possible advantage for them?

He pushed the levers inward, and the chair rolled forward. He skillfully maneuvered between the chairs, but it still took nearly a full minute to get to the door. I'm a snail. A worm living in a metal carapace, a water snail creeping along the edge of the aquarium glass, trying to keep it clean from the filth of the fish. I'm the loathsome one; they're the golden ones that shine in the sparkling water. They're the ones whose death is mourned. But without me they'd die. I'm as responsible for their beauty as they are. More, because I work to sustain it, and they simply — are.

It came out this way whenever he tried to reason out an excuse for his own life. He rolled down the corridor to the front door of the school. He knew, intellectually, that his work in crop rotation and timing had been the key to opening up the vast New Soil Lands here in the eastern Utah desert. Hadn't they invented a civilian medal for him, and then, for good measure, given him the same medal they gave to the freedom riders who went out and brought immigrant trains safely into the mountains? I was a hero, they said, this worm in his wheelchair house. But Governor Monson had looked at him with those distant, pitying eyes. He, too, saw the worm; Carpenter might be a hero, but he was still Carpenter.

They had built a concrete ramp for his chair after the second time the students knocked over the wooden ramp and forced him to summon help through the computer airlink network. He remembered sitting on the lip of the porch, looking out toward the cabins of the village. If anyone saw him, then they consented to his imprisonment, because they didn't come to help him. But Carpenter understood. Fear of the strange, the unknown. It wasn't *comfortable* for them, to be near Mr. Carpenter with the mechanical voice and the electric rolling chair. He understood, he really did, he was human, too, wasn't he? He even agreed with them. Pretend Carpenter isn't there, and maybe he'll go away.

The helicopter came as he rolled out onto the asphalt of the street. It

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landed in the circle, between the storehouse and the chapel. Four marshals came out of the gash in its side and spread out through the town.

It happened that Carpenter was rolling in front of Bishop Anderson's house when the marshal knocked on the door. He hadn't expected them to make the arrests while he was still going down the street. His first impulse was to speed up, to get away from the arrest. He didn't want to see. He liked Bishop Anderson. Used to, anyway. He didn't wish him ill. If the bishop had kept his hands out of the harvest, if he hadn't betrayed his trust, he wouldn't have been afraid to hear the knock on the door and see the badge in the marshal's hand.

Carpenter could hear Sister Anderson crying as they led her husband away. Was Kippie there, watching? Did he notice Mr. Carpenter passing by on the road? Carpenter knew what it would cost these families. Not just the shame, though it would be intense. Far worse would be the loss of their father for years, the extra labor for the children. To break up a family was a terrible thing to do, for the innocent would pay as great a cost as their guilty father, and it wasn't fair, for they had done no wrong. But it was the stern necessity, if civilization was to survive.

Carpenter slowed down his wheelchair, forcing himself to hear the weeping from the bishop's house, to let them look at him with hatred if they knew what he had done. And they would know: He had specifically refused to be anonymous. If I can inflict stern necessity on them, then I must not run from the consequences of my own actions. I will bear what I must bear, as well — the grief, the resentment, and the rage of the few families I have harmed for the sake of all the rest.

The helicopter had taken off again before Carpenter's chair took him home. It sputtered overhead and disappeared into the low clouds. Rain again tomorrow, of course. Three days dry, three days wet; it had been the weather pattern all spring. The rain would come pounding tonight. Four hours till dark. Maybe the rain wouldn't come until dark.

He looked up from his book. He *had* heard footsteps outside his house. And whispers. He rolled to the window and looked out. The sky was a little darker. The computer said it was 4:30. The wind was coming up. But the sounds he heard hadn't been the wind. It had been 3:30 when the marshals came. Four-thirty now, and footsteps and whispers outside his house. He felt the stiffening in his arms and legs. Wait, he told himself. There's nothing to fear. Relax. Quiet. Yes. His body eased. His heart pounded, but it was slowing down.

The door crashed open. He was rigid at once. He couldn't even bring

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his hands down to touch the levers so he could turn to see who it was. He just spread there helplessly in his chair as the heavy footfalls came closer.

"There he is." The voice was Kippie's.

Hands seized his arms, pulled on him; the chair rocked as they tugged him to one side. He could not relax. "Son of a bitch is stiff as a statue." Pope's voice. Get out of here, little boy, said Carpenter, you're in something too deep for you. But of course they did not hear him, since his fingers couldn't reach the keyboard where he kept his voice.

"Maybe this is what he does when he isn't at school. Just sits here and makes statues at the window." Kippie laughed.

"He's scared stiff, that's what he is."

"Just bring him out, and fast." LaVon's voice carried authority.

They tried to lift him out of the chair, but his body was too rigid; they hurt him, though, trying, for his thighs pressed up against the computer with cruel force, and they wrung at his arms.

"Just carry the whole chair," said LaVon.

They picked up the chair and pulled him toward the door. His arms smacked against the corners and the doorframe. "It's like he's dead or something," said Kippie. "He don't say nothin'."

He was shouting at them in his mind, however. What are you doing here? Getting some sort of vengeance? Do you think punishing me will bring your fathers back, you fools?

They pulled and pushed the chair into the van they had parked in front. The bishop's van — Kippie wouldn't have the use of *that* much longer. How much of the stolen grain was carried in here?

"He's going to roll around back here," said Kippie.

"Tip him over," said LaVon.

Carpenter felt the chair fly under him; by chance he landed in such a way that his left arm was not caught behind the chair. It would have broken then. As it was, the impact with the floor bent his arm forcibly against the strength of his spasmed muscles; he felt something tear, and his throat made a sound in spite of his effort to bear it silently.

"Did you hear that?" said Pope. "He's got a voice."

"Not for much longer," said LaVon.

For the first time Carpenter realized that it wasn't just pain that he had to fear. Now, only an hour after their fathers had been taken, long before time could cool their rage, these boys had murder in their hearts.

The road was smooth enough in town, but soon it became rough and painful. From that, Carpenter knew they were headed toward the fringe. He could feel the cold metal of the van's corrugated floor against his face;

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the pain in his arm was settling down to a steady throb. Relax, quiet, calm, he told himself. How many times in your life have you wished to die? Death means nothing to you, fool — you decided that years ago — death is nothing but a release from this corpse. So what are you afraid of? Calm, quiet. His arms bent, his legs relaxed.

"He's getting soft again," reported Pope. From the front of the van, Kippie guffawed. "Little and squirmy. Mr. Bug. We always call you that, you hear me, Mr. Bug? There was always two of you. Mr. Machine and Mr. Bug. Mr. Machine was mean and tough and smart, but Mr. Bug was weak and squishy and gross, with wiggly legs. Made us want to puke, looking at Mr. Bug."

I've been tormented by master torturers in my childhood, Pope Griffith. You are only a pathetic echo of their talent. Carpenter's words were silent, until his hands found the keys. His left hand was almost too weak to use, after the fall, so he coded the words clumsily with his right hand alone. "If I disappear the day of your father's arrest, Mr. Griffith, don't you think they'll guess who took me?"

"Keep his hands away from the keys!" shouted LaVon. "Don't let him touch the computer."

Almost immediately the van lurched and took a savage bounce as it left the roadway. Now it was clattering over rough, unfinished ground. Carpenter's head banged against the metal floor, again and again. The pain of it made him go rigid; fortunately, spasms always carried his head upward to the right, so that his rigidity kept him from having his head beaten to unconsciousness.

Soon the bouncing stopped. The engine died. Carpenter could hear the wind whispering over the open desert land. They were beyond the fields and orchards, out past the grassland of the fringe. The van doors opened. LaVon and Kippie reached in and pulled him out, chair and all. They dragged the chair to the top of a wash. There was no water in it yet.

"Let's just throw him down," said Kippie. "Break his spastic little neck." Carpenter had not guessed that anger could burn so hot in these languid, mocking boys.

But LaVon showed no fire. He was cold and smooth as snow. "I don't want to kill him yet. I want to hear him talk first."

Carpenter reached out to code an answer. LaVon slapped his hands away, gripped the computer, braced a foot on the wheelchair, and tore the computer off its mounting. He threw it across the arroyo; it smacked against the far side and tumbled down into the dry wash. Probably it wasn't damaged, but it wasn't the computer Carpenter was frightened for. Until now Carpenter had been able to cling to a hope that they just meant to frighten him. But it was unthinkable to treat precious electronic equipment that

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way, not if civilization still had any hold on LaVon.

"With your *voice,* Mr. Carpenter. Not the machine, your own voice."

Not for you, Mr. Jensen. I don't humiliate myself for you.

"Come on," said Pope. "You know what we said. We just take him down into the wash and leave him there."

"We'll send him down the quick way," said Kippie. He shoved at the wheelchair, teetering it toward the brink.

"We'll *take* him down!" shouted Pope. "We aren't going to kill him! You promised!"

"Lot of difference it makes," said Kippie. "As soon as it rains in the mountains, this sucker's gonna fill up with water and give him the swim of his life."

"We don't kill him," insisted Pope.

"Come on," said LaVon. "Let's get him down into the wash."

Carpenter concentrated on not going rigid as they wrestled the chair down the slope. The walls of the wash weren't sheer, but they were steep enough that the climb down wasn't easy. Carpenter tried to concentrate on mathematics problems so he wouldn't panic and writhe for them again. Finally the chair came to rest at the bottom of the wash.

"You think you can come here and decide who's good and who's bad, right?" said LaVon. "You think you can sit on your little throne and decide whose father's going to jail, is that it?"

Carpenter's hands rested on the twisted mountings that used to hold his computer. He felt naked, defenseless without his stinging, frightening voice to whip them into line. LaVon was smart to take away his voice. LaVon knew what Carpenter could do with words.

"Everybody does it," said Kippie. "You're the only one who doesn't black the harvest, and that's only because you can't."

"It's easy to be straight when you can't get anything on the side, anyway," said Pope.

Nothing's easy, Mr. Griffith. Not even virtue.

"My father's a good man!" shouted Kippie. "He's the bishop, for Christ's sake! And you sent him to jail!"

"If he ain't shot," said Pope.

"They don't shoot you for blacking anymore," said LaVon. "That was in the old days."

The old days. Only five years ago. But those were the old days for these children. Children are innocent in the eyes of God, Carpenter reminded himself. He tried to believe that these boys didn't know what they were doing to him.

Kippie and Pope started up the side of the wash. "Come on," said Pope. "Come on, LaVon."

"Minute," said LaVon. He leaned close to Carpenter and spoke softly, intensely, his breath hot and foul, his spittle like sparks from a cookfire on

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Carpenter's face. "Just ask me," he said. "Just open your mouth and beg me, little man, and I'll carry you back up to the van. They'll let you live if I tell them to, you know that."

He knew it. But he also knew that LaVon would never tell them to spare his life.

"Beg me, Mr. Carpenter. Ask me please to let you live, and you'll live. Look. I'll even save your little talkbox for you." He scooped up the computer from the sandy bottom and heaved it up out of the wash. It sailed over Kippie's head just as he was emerging from the arroyo.

"What the hell was that, you trying to kill me?"

LaVon whispered again. "You know how many times you made me crawl? And now I gotta crawl forever, my father's a jailbird thanks to you; I got little brothers and sisters — even if you hate me, what've you got against them, huh?"

A drop of rain struck Carpenter in the face. There were a few more drops.

"Feel that?" said LaVon. "The rain in the mountains makes this wash flood every time. You crawl for me, Carpenter, and I'll take you up."

Carpenter didn't feel particularly brave as he kept his mouth shut and made no sound. If he actually believed LaVon might keep his promise, he would swallow his pride and beg. But LaVon was lying. He couldn't afford to save Carpenter's life now, even if he wanted to. It had gone too far, the consequences would be too great. Carpenter had to die, accidently drowned, no witnesses, such a sad thing, such a great man, and no one the wiser about the three boys who carried him to his dying place.

If he begged and whined in his hound voice, his cat voice, his bestial monster voice, then LaVon would smirk at him in triumph and whisper, "Sucker." Carpenter knew the boy too well. Tomorrow LaVon would have second thoughts, of course, but right now there'd be no softening. He only wanted his triumph to be complete, that's why he held out a hope. He wanted to watch Carpenter twist like a worm and bay like a hound before he died. It was a victory, then, to keep silence. Let him remember me in his nightmares of guilt, let him remember I had courage enough not to whimper.

LaVon spat at him; the spittle struck him in the chest. "I can't even get it in your ugly little worm face," he said. Then he shoved the wheelchair and scrambled up the bank of the wash.

For a moment the chair hung in balance; then it tipped over. This time Carpenter relaxed during the fall and rolled out of the chair without further injury. His back was to the side of the wash they had climbed; he couldn't see if they were watching him or not. So he held still, except for a slight twitching of his hurt left arm. After a while the van drove away.

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Only then did he begin to reach out his arms and paw at the sand of the arroyo bottom. His legs were completely useless, dragging behind him. But he was not totally helpless without his chair. He could control his arms, and by reaching them out and then pulling his body onto his elbows, he could make good progress across the sand. How did they think he got from his wheelchair to bed, or to the toilet? Hadn't they seen him use his hands and arms? Of course they saw, but they assumed that because his arms were weak, they were useless.

Then he got to the arroyo wall and realized that they *were* useless. As soon as there was any slope to climb, his left arm began to hurt badly. And the bank was steep. Without being able to use his fingers to clutch at one of the sagebrushes or tree starts, there was no hope he could climb out.

The lightning was flashing in the distance, and he could hear the thunder. The rain here was a steady *plick plick plick* on the sand, a tiny slapping sound on the few leaves. It would already be raining heavily in the mountains. Soon the water would be here.

He dragged himself another meter up the slope despite the pain. The sand scraped his elbows as he dug with them to pull himself along. The rain fell steadily now, many large drops, but still not a downpour. It was little comfort to Carpenter. Water was beginning to dribble down the sides of the wash and form puddles in the streambed.

With bitter humor he imagined himself telling Dean Wintz, "On second thought, I don't want to go out and teach sixth grade. I'll just go right on teaching them here, when they come off the farm. Just the few who want to learn something beyond sixth grade, who want a university education. The ones who love books and numbers and languages, the ones who understand civilization and want to keep it alive. Give me the children who *want* to learn, instead of these poor sandscrapers who go to school only because the law commands that six years out of their first fifteen years have to be spent as captives in the prison of learning."

Why do the fire-eaters go out searching for the old missile sites and risk their lives disarming them? To preserve civilization. Why do the freedom riders leave their safe homes and go out to bring the frightened, lonely refugees in to the safety of the mountains? To preserve civilization.

And why had Timothy Carpenter informed the marshals about the black marketeering he had discovered in Reefrock Farms? Was it, truly, to preserve civilization?

Yes, he insisted to himself.

The water was flowing now along the bottom of the wash. His feet were near the flow. He painfully pulled

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himself up another meter. He had to keep his body pointed straight toward the side of the wash, or he would not be able to stop himself from rolling to one side or the other. He found that by kicking his legs in his spastic, uncontrolled fashion, he could root the toes of his shoes into the sand just enough that he could take some pressure off his arms, just for a moment.

No, he told himself. It was not just to preserve civilization. It was because of the swaggering way their children walked, in their stolen clothing, with their full bellies and healthy skin and hair, cocky as only security can make a child feel. Enough and to spare, that's what they had, while the poor suckers around them worried whether there'd be food enough for the winter, and if their mother was getting enough so the nursing baby wouldn't lack, and whether their shoes could last another summer. The thieves could take a wagon up the long road to Price or even to Zarahemla, the shining city on the Mormon Sea, while the children of honest men never saw anything but the dust and sand and ruddy mountains of the fringe.

Carpenter hated them for that, for all the differences in the world, for the children who had legs and walked nowhere that mattered, for the children who had voices and used them to speak stupidity, who had deft and clever fingers and used them to frighten and compel the weak. For all the inequalities in the world, he hated them and wanted them to pay for it. They couldn't go to jail for having obedient arms and legs and tongues, but they could damn well go for stealing the hard-earned harvest of trusting men and women. Whatever his own motives might be, that was reason enough to call it justice.

The water was rising many centimeters every minute. The current was tugging at his feet now. He released his elbows to reach them up for another, higher purchase on the bank, but no sooner had he reached out his arms than he slid downward and the current pulled harder at him. It took great effort just to return to where he started, and his left arm was on fire with the tearing muscles. Still, it was life, wasn't it? His left elbow rooted him in place while he reached with his right arm and climbed higher still, and again higher. He even tried to use his fingers to cling to the soil, to a branch, to a rock, but his fists stayed closed and hammered uselessly against the ground.

Am I vengeful, bitter, spiteful? Maybe I am. But whatever my motive was, they were thieves, and had no business remaining among the people they had betrayed. It was hard on the children, of course, cruelly hard on them, to have their fathers stripped away from them by the authorities. But how much worse would it be for

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the fathers to stay, and the children to learn that trust was for the stupid and honor for the weak? What kind of people would we be then, if the children could do their numbers and letters but couldn't hold someone else's plate and leave the food on it untouched?

The water was up to his waist. The current was rocking him slightly, pulling him downstream. His legs were floating behind him now, and water was trickling down the bank, making the earth looser under his elbows. So the children wanted him dead now, in their fury. He would die in a good cause, wouldn't he?

With the water rising faster, the current swifter, he decided that martyrdom was not all it was cracked up to be. Nor was life, when he came right down to it, something to be given up lightly because of a few inconveniences. He managed to squirm up a few more centimeters, but now a shelf of earth blocked him. Someone with hands could have reached over it easily and grabbed hold of the sagebrush just above it.

He clenched his mouth tight and lifted his arm up onto the shelf of dirt. He tried to scrape some purchase for his forearm, but the soil was slick. When he tried to place some weight on the arm, he slid down again.

This was it, this was his death, he could feel it; and in the sudden rush of fear, his body went rigid. Almost at once his feet caught on the rocky bed of the river and stopped him from sliding farther. Spastic, his legs were of some use to him. He swung his right arm up, scraped his fist on the sagebrush stem, trying to pry his clenched fingers open.

And, with agonizing effort, he did it. All but the smallest finger opened enough to hook the stem. Now the clenching was some help to him. He used his left arm mercilessly, ignoring the pain, to pull him up a little farther, onto the shelf; his feet were still in the water, but his waist wasn't, and the current wasn't strong against him now.

It was a victory, but not much of one. The water wasn't even a meter deep yet, and the current wasn't yet strong enough to have carried away his wheelchair. But it was enough to kill him, if he hadn't come this far. Still, what was he really accomplishing? In storms like this, the water came up near the top; he'd have been dead for an hour before the water began to come down again.

He could hear, in the distance, a vehicle approaching on the road. Had they come back to watch him die? They couldn't be that stupid. How far was this wash from the highway? Not far — they hadn't driven that long on the rough ground to get here. But it meant nothing. No one would see him, or even the computer that lay among the tumbleweeds and sagebrush at the arroyo's edge.

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They might hear him. It was possible. If their window was open — in a rainstorm? If their engine was quiet — but loud enough that he could hear them? Impossible, impossible. And it might be the boys again, come to hear him scream and whine for life; I'm not going to cry out now, after so many years of silence—

But the will to live, he discovered, was stronger than shame; his voice came unbidden to his throat. His lips and tongue and teeth that in childhood had so painstakingly practiced words that only his family could ever understand now formed a word again: "Help!" It was a difficult word; it almost closed his mouth, it made him too quiet to hear. So at last he simply howled, saying nothing except the terrible sound of his voice.

The brakes squealed, long and loud, and the vehicle rattled to a stop. The engine died. Carpenter howled again. Car doors slammed. "I tell you it's just a dog somewhere, somebody's old dog—"

Carpenter howled again.

"Dog or not, it's alive, isn't it?"

They ran along the edge of the arroyo, and someone saw him.

"A little kid!"

"What's he doing down there!"

"Come on, kid, you can climb up from there!"

I nearly killed myself climbing this far, you fool, if I *could* climb, don't you think I *would* have? Help me! He cried out again.

"It's not a little boy. He's got a beard—"

"Come on, hold on, we're coming down!"

"There's a wheelchair in the water—"

"He must be a cripple."

There were several voices, some of them women, but it was two strong men who reached him, splashing their feet in the water. They hooked him under the arms and carried him to the top.

"Can you stand up? Are you all right? Can you stand?"

Carpenter strained to squeeze out the word: "No."

The older woman took command. "He's got palsy, as any fool can see. Go back down there and get his wheelchair, Tom, no sense in making him wait till they can get him another one, go on down! It's not that bad down there, the flood isn't here yet!" Her voice was crisp and clear, perfect speech, almost foreign it was so precise. She and the young woman carried him to the truck. It was a big old flatbed truck from the old days, and on its back was a canvas-covered heap of odd shapes. On the canvas Carpenter read the words SWEETWATER'S MIRACLE PAGEANT. Traveling show people, then, racing for town to get out of the rain, and through some miracle they had heard his call.

"Your poor arms," said the young woman, wiping off grit and sand that had sliced his elbows. "Did you climb

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that far out of there with just your arms?"

The young men came out of the arroyo muddy and cursing, but they had the wheelchair. They tied it quickly to the back of the truck; one of the men found the computer, too, and took it inside the cab. It was designed to be rugged, and to Carpenter's relief it still worked.

"Thank you," said his mechanical voice.

"I told them I heard something, and they said I was crazy," said the old woman. "You live in Reefrock?"

"Yes," said his voice.

"Amazing what those old machines can still do, even after being dumped there in the rain," said the old woman. "Well, you came close to death, there, but you're all right, it's the best we can ask for. We'll take you to the doctor."

'Just take me home. Please."

So they did, but insisted on helping him bathe and fixing him dinner. The rain was coming down in sheets when they were done. "All I have is a floor," he said, "but you can stay."

"Better then trying to pitch the tents in this." So they stayed the night.

Carpenter's arms ached too badly for him to sleep, even though he was exhausted. He lay awake thinking of the current pulling him, imagining what would have happened to him, how far he might have gone downstream before drowning, where his body might have ended up. Caught in a snag somewhere, dangling on some branch or rock as the water went down and left his slack body to dry in the sun. Far out in the desert somewhere, maybe. Or perhaps the floodwater might have carried him all the way to the Colorado and tumbled him head over heels down the rapids, through the canyons, past the ruins of the old dams, and finally into the Gulf of California. He'd pass through Navaho territory then, and the Hopi Protectorate, and into areas that the Chihuahua claimed and threatened to go to war to keep. He'd see more of the world than he had seen in his life.

I saw more of the world tonight, he thought, than I had ever thought to see. I saw death and how much I feared it.

And he looked into himself, wondering how much he had changed.

Late in the morning, when he finally awoke, the pageant people were gone. They had a show, of course, and had to do some kind of parade to let people know. School would let out early so they could put on the show without having to waste power on lights. There'd be no school this afternoon. But what about his morning classes? There must have been some question when he didn't show up; someone would have called, and if he didn't answer the phone, someone would have come by. Maybe the show people had still been here when

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they came. The word would have spread through school that he was still alive.

He tried to imagine LaVon and Kippie and Pope hearing that Mr. Machine, Mr. Bug, Mr. Carpenter was still alive. They'd be afraid, of course. Maybe defiant. Maybe they had even confessed. No, not that. LaVon would keep them quiet. Try to think of a way out. Maybe even plan an escape, though finding a place to go that wasn't under Utah authority would be a problem.

What am I doing? Trying to plan how my enemies can escape retribution? I should call the marshals again and tell them what happened. If someone hasn't called them already.

His wheelchair waited by his bed. The show people had shined it up for him, got rid of all the muck. Even straightened the computer mounts and tied the computer on; jury-rigged it, but it would do. Would the motor run, after being under water? He saw that they had even changed batteries and had the old one set aside. They were good people. Not at all what the stories said about show gypsies. Though there was no natural law that people who help cripples can't also seduce all the young girls in the village.

His arms hurt and his left arm was weak and trembly, but he managed to get into the chair. The pain brought back yesterday. I'm alive today, and yet today doesn't feel any different from last week, when I was also alive. Being on the brink of death wasn't enough; the only transformation is to die.

He ate lunch because it was nearly noon. Eldon Finch came by to see him, along with the sheriff. "I'm the new bishop," said Eldon.

"Didn't waste any time," said Carpenter.

"I gotta tell you, Brother Carpenter, things are in a tizzy today. Yesterday, too, of course, what with avenging angels dropping out of the sky and taking away people we all trusted. There's some says you shouldn't've told, and some says you did right, and some ain't sayin' nothin' 'cause they're afraid somethin'll get told on *them*. Ugly times, ugly times, when folks steal from their neighbors."

Sheriff Budd finally spoke up. "Almost as ugly as tryin' to drownd 'em."

The bishop nodded. "'Course you know the reason we come, Sheriff Budd and me, we come to find out who done it."

"Done what?"

"Plunked you down that wash. You aren't gonna tell me you drove that little wheelie chair of yours out there past the fringe. What, was you speedin' so fast you lost control and spun out? Give me peace of heart, Brother Carpenter, give me trust." The bishop and the sheriff both laughed at that. Quite a joke.

Now's the time, thought Carpen-

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ter. Name the names. The motive will be clear, justice will be done. They put you through the worst hell of your life, they made you cry out for help, they taught you the taste of death. Now even things up.

But he didn't key their names into the computer. He thought of Kippie's mother crying at the door. When the crying stopped, there'd be years ahead. They were a long way from proving out their land. Kippie was through with school, he'd never go on, never get out. The adult burden was on those boys now, years too young. Should their families suffer even more, with another generation gone to prison? Carpenter had nothing to gain, and many who were guiltless stood to lose too much.

"Brother Carpenter," said Sheriff Budd. "Who was it?"

He keyed in his answer. "I didn't get a look at them."

"Their voices, didn't you know them?"

"No."

The bishop looked steadily at him. "They tried to kill you, Brother Carpenter. That's no joke. You like to died, if those show people hadn't happened by. And I have my own ideas who it was, seein' who had reason to hate you unto death yesterday."

"As you said. A lot of people think an outsider like me should have kept his nose out of Reefrock's business."

The bishop frowned at him. "You scared they'll try again?"

"No."

"Nothin' I can do," said the sheriff. " I think you're a damn fool, Brother Carpenter, but nothin' I can do if you don't even care."

"Thanks for coming by."

He didn't go to church Sunday. But on Monday he went to school, same time as usual. And there were La Von and Kippie and Pope, right in their places. But not the same as usual. The wisecracks were over. When he called on them, they answered if they could and didn't if they couldn't. When he looked at them, they looked away.

He didn't know if it was shame or fear that he might someday tell; he didn't care. The mark was on them. They would marry someday, go out into even newer lands just behind the ever-advancing fringe, have babies, work until their bodies were exhausted, and then drop into a grave. But they'd remember that one day they had left a cripple to die. He had no idea what it would mean to them, but they would remember.

Within a few weeks LaVon and Kippie were out of school; with their fathers gone, there was too much fieldwork and school was a luxury their families couldn't afford for them. Pope had an older brother still at home, so he stayed out the year.

One time Pope almost talked to him. It was a windy day that spattered sand against the classroom window, and the storm coming out of the

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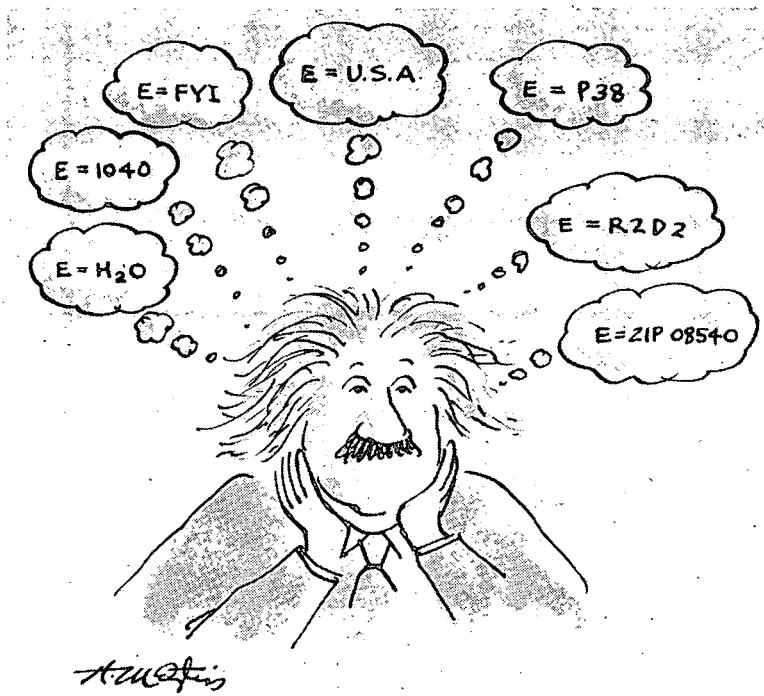
south looked to be a nasty one. When class was over, most of the kids ducked their heads and rushed outside, hurrying to get home before the downpour began. A few stayed, though, to talk with Carpenter about this and that. When the last one left, Carpenter saw that Pope was still there. His pencil was hovering over a piece of paper. He looked up at Carpenter, then set the pencil down, picked up his books, started for the door. He paused for a moment with his hand on the doorknob. Carpenter waited for him to speak. But the boy only opened the door and went on out.

Carpenter rolled over to the door and watched him as he walked away. The wind caught at his jacket. Like a kite, thought Carpenter, it's lifting him along.

But it wasn't true. The boy didn't rise and fly. And now Carpenter saw the wind like a current down the village street, sweeping Pope away. All the bodies in the world, caught in that same current, that same wind, blown down the same rivers, the same streets, and finally coming to rest on some snag, through some door, in some grave, God knows where or why.



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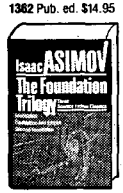

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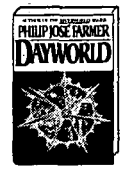

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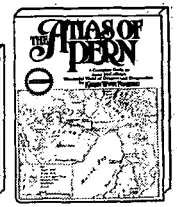

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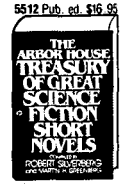

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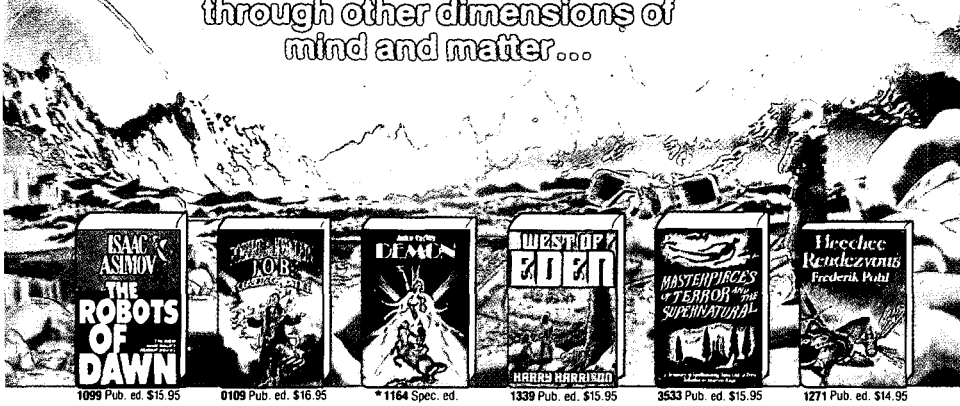

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